Vsevolod Nestaiko

TWO TOREADORS FROM VASUKOVKA VILLAGE

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TWO TOREADORS FROM VASUKOVKA VILLAGE

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RADUGA PUBLISHERS
Moscow

REQUEST TO READERS

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Вс. Нестайко

ТОРЕАДОРЫ ИЗ ВАСЮКОВКИ

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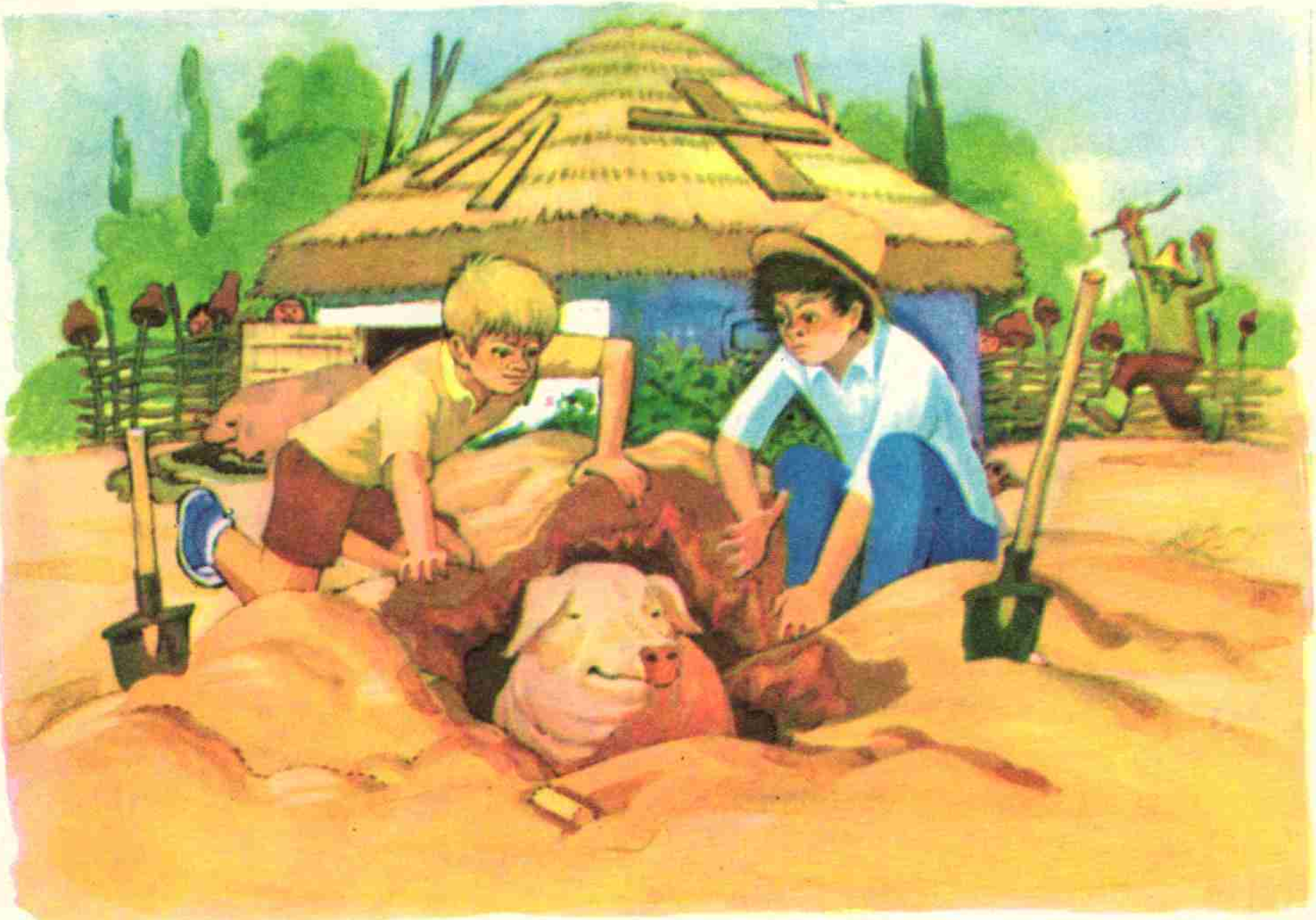
THE ADVENTURES OF ROBINSON CUCKOORUSOE AND HIS FAITHFUL FRIEND AND CLASSMATE PAVLIK ZAVGORODNY, IN SCHOOL, AT HOME AND ON A DESERT ISLAND NEAR VASUKOVKA VILLAGE



Chapter 1

A SUBWAY UNDER THE PIGSTY

"You scoundrel! You good-for-nothing brat! Ivan! Get out of there! If you don't, I'll paddle you so hard you won't sit down for a week. Get out! Hear me? Get out!"

We were lying in a patch of weeds behind the shed with our noses close to the ground, trying not to breathe.

"Get out, you scamp, or you'll be sorry! You know me!"

"I sure do," my pal mumbled faintly. He finally got up the courage to speak. "Grandpa!" he whined.

"Come on out!"

"Grandpa!" he whined still more pitifully. "You go behind the house, and we'll come out."

"You telling me what to do? I said come on out!"

"It was an accident. We wanted it to be a subway. Like the one in Kiev. We'll fill it up so's it'll be like it was. And we'll clean out the pigsty. You just walk away, Grandpa."

The negotiations continued for quite some time. Finally, his grandfather swore at us a last time, was overcome with a fit of coughing and trudged off behind the house, dragging his game leg. We crawled out of the thicket. Outside the pigsty the huge sow Manuna, as spotted as a map of the world, greeted us with a deep grunt.

"Ah-h, you beast!"

She was the cause of all our trouble.

W'd had a wonderful idea: we'd dig a subway tunnel under the pigsty. It was to be a great surprise. The first subway line in Vasukovka Village! There'd be two stations: The Drying Shed and The Crooked Pear Tree. The fare would be three kopecks one way, with relatives travelling free of charge, while the math teacher would have to pay five kopecks.

We'd tunnelled nearly half-way under the pigsty when catastrophe had struck: the darn sow Manuna had come crashing down into the tunnel. She'd fallen in easily enough, but as for getting out again, that was another matter entirely. She'd begun squealing so loud my pal's grandpa'd come limping over. And then...

We sighed and began filling in the subway, glancing over our shoulders every now and then to make sure the old man hadn't suddenly come back to box our ears, even though he said he wouldn't touch us till we'd done the job. But who could tell? We had to be on our guard. The things he said when he was pulling Manuna out! It's a wonder he'd learned all those words, for they weren't in any dictionary, that's for sure.

However, the old man was nowhere in sight, and so I'll introduce you to my friend while we're digging away (and what a hard, boring and disgusting job it is).

You certainly know there's an island named Java. It is in the Indian Ocean. The one that's Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Calimantan.

Well, I want you to know that Java isn't an island. Java is my best friend. His name is Java Ren.

You're probably wondering what sort of a name that is, I mean Java. Well, it was like this. When he was little, not even a year old, that's what he called himself. Maybe he was trying to say his name Ivan. Anyway, Java stuck to him like burrs to a dog's tail. And even Valigura, the village militiaman, calls him that. Actually, Java's whole family is rather strange.

His father plays the fiddle. Their cow's name is Contribution. And old Grandpa Varava (you're already acquainted with him) is a rare old hunter. When he's out hunting he ties a kerchief over his left eye when he shoots, 'cause his left eye won't shut if his right eye's open. If he shuts his left eye, his right one closes all by itself. Even so, Grandpa Varava's a crack shot.

The city hunters who drive up from Kiev in their big cars just gasp to watch him. "You're the all-around champion, Grandpa," someone's sure to say.

Why, even the lake outside the village was named Lake Ren after Grandpa Ren.

Java's mother is a deputy of the District Soviet. She's also in charge of a team of corn-growers. One day Java had a fight with his kid sister Irina. He hit her in public, but instead of bawling she suddenly began to shout.

"Shame on you! Mama's a deputy! The whole village is watching!"

She made so much noise that Java didn't know what to do. He stood there for a while, and his face was as red as a beet, and then he tore off down the street.

Actually, that only happened once, because Java's a rare person. He's made of steel. He's one in a million. As he said,

"You and me are two fine fellows, Pavlik. That's the honest truth. We've got imagination. Don't we?"

"We sure do."

"Did you hear what Grandpa Salivon said outside the store yesterday? He said: 'There's Java and Pavlik. They sure are a pair of comedians. First-class pirates, that's what. What they need is a good walloping!'"

"That's what he said. I heard him."

"That's what everyone should be saying about us. We want our fame to ring out all through the village, just like the radio does on May Day."

"That's right."

So Java kept thinking up all sorts of things to make us famous.

We caught an owl in the woods and let it out in the community centre during a lecture entitled "The Children in the Family." The lecturer tumbled off the stage, bringing the pitcher of water down on his head.

"Let's have a bullfight," Java said one day that summer.

"What?"

"Remember that foreign film, 'The Toreador'?"

"Yep. What of it?"

"Remember, there was that wild bull in the arena, and a man in a flat hat was flashing a dagger and prancing about in front of it?"

"Yep."

"And then *zipp!* The bull went *plunk!* And everybody applauded."

"Yep. It was great. But you've got to kill it. Who'll let us kill a head of cattle?"

"You dope. Kill it! What d'you think we're going to have, a slaughter-house? It'll be a show. At the stadium. Like soccer. The main thing's to wave a red kerchief around in front of the bull's eyes and then dart away in time so's its horns won't nick you. You saw how it's done. Toreadors are real heroes. What

we need is practice. And you've got to be brave, and light on your feet. Understand? We'll put on a bullfight for the first time in the history of Vasukovka. Featuring Ivan Ren, toreador, and Pavel Zavgorodny, toreador. People will flock here from all over the Ukraine. It'll be broadcasted over the radio and TV. Even your relatives in Zhmerinka can watch us."

I thought it over. It really was a great idea. They'd show us on TV. We'd be on the radio and, in general ... even my relatives in Zhmerinka would see us.

We sat back comfortably and began going over the details. First of all, we'd need a bull. We rejected the collective farm's prize bull Petka, because he was such a monster that even the vet was scared of him. His eyes were like a pair of tractor headlights, and he was as big as a combine-harvester. When he pawed the ground you'd think it was an excavator. No one'd come within a mile of him. He even chased one of the summer residents up a pole. That was why we decided Petka was not for us. He was for our enemies.

But since Petka was the only bull in the village, our second choice was the billygoat Zhora. I nominated him just to get even. I hated that old goat, because he'd chewed my good shirt to pieces while I was swimming.

But Java was against it. "No, he's no good. All he ever does is bleat. Why, we won't even hear the applause. And then, it's a bullfight, not a goatfight. We've got to have something big that has horns: a bull, or a cow."

"Listen, maybe we can use a cow? After all, there's no rule that says it's got to be a bull," I said.

"Maybe you're right," he said after thinking it over. "There's no better cow than your cow Contribution."

"Why Contribution? Why not your cow Manka?"

"Because Manka has a calf now, and one of her horns is broken. D'you want everybody to laugh at us? Two toreadors fighting a one-horned cow! What a laugh! I bet no one's ever seen anything like that."

"We might use Contribution, but she's a bit psycho."
"What d'you mean by psycho? Why don't you say you're scared of your ma?"
"Me, scared? I'll crack you one to show you how scared I am. Take your words back!"
"Even if I do, you're still scared."
"I'm scared?"
"Yes."
"I'm scared?"
"Yes."
This was too much for Java. He cracked me one. I socked him in the stomach. Then we were at each other, falling into the grass and rolling down to the road where every bit of dirt clung to our clothes. I was the first to come to my senses.
"Wait! Stop! We're having a dope fight instead of a bullfight."
"It's all your fault. All right, let's try Contribution. Your Manka'll look funny on TV. She's so stupid."
I was just about to feel hurt on Manka's account, but changed my mind, because I was tired of fighting.
The next morning we met on the road to the meadow. I drove Manka ahead of me, and Java drove Contribution ahead of him. The cows ambled along, swishing their tails lazily, never suspecting that this was a historic day in their lives.
Java was wearing his mother's wide-brimmed hat, the one she wore to conferences in Kiev. The hat was too big for him and kept slipping over his eyes. He had to keep tossing back his head every few minutes to see where he was going, and this made it look like he was bowing to someone. Naturally, he'd taken the hat without his ma's permission.
I had a little tapestry rug rolled up under my arm. It was a famous rug. I could remember it from as far back as I could remember, as it'd been tacked to the wall over my bed since the day I was born. Three cute puppies were embroidered on a red

background. They were all in a row with their heads close together. My ma had told me so many bedtime stories about them. For the past two years, though, ever since I was grown-up, the rug'd been put away in a chest, making the puppies smell strongly of mothballs.

The rug and the hat were part of our toreador outfit. On the way to the meadow we cut down two hazel switches to use as swords. Now we were fully equipped. As we walked down the road, we sang the few lines we knew of the toreador's song from "Carmen". We had no way of knowing what awaited us.

The sky above was as blue as a real Spanish sky. The weather was just right for a bullfight.

We drove our cows to the far end of the meadow where the pond was, far from any passersby.

"We don't want Manka to be in the way. You lead her off, and then we can begin," Java said.

I didn't argue, especially since Manka's a very nervous cow. She'd be better off not seeing a bullfight.

Java pushed back his hat, pulled up his pants and took my rug. He danced about a bit and began approaching Contribution on tiptoe. Then he was smack up against her, waving the rug in front of her. I held my breath. This was it.

Contribution nibbled away at the grass.

Java waved harder. Contribution paid no attention to him.

Java slapped the rug against her cheek. Contribution turned away.

Java grunted and slapped her again, hard. Contribution, shifting her weight lazily from hoof to hoof, turned her tail end to Java. He ran around and began dancing in front of her again.

Half an hour later he said, "She's used to me. She likes me. You have a try."

Half an hour later, by which time I was completely out of breath, I said, "She's no cow, she's a hunk of beef. Too bad

Manka has a broken horn, or I'd show you what a real cow is."

So Java tried his luck again. Every now and then he'd change his tactics: first he'd tiptoe up and slap the rug against her all of a sudden; then he'd come charging up; then he'd approach from the side, but Contribution refused to enter into battle.

Our hair was wet from perspiration, as we flapped the rug around, and the three puppies looked as if they were about to start barking. Contribution didn't bat an eye. Once, however, when Java grabbed her ear her sad eyes looked at him reproachfully and she said: "Moo-o-o!" Translated from cow's language, it probably meant: "Run along, boys, and stop pestering me."

But we didn't understand her, not then, and kept goading her on and prancing about, challenging her to a battle. I could see Java was ashamed of the way Contribution was behaving. Finally, he shouted, "Come on, Pavlik! Sock her good! What's the matter? You scared? Then I'll do it myself!" And he kicked Contribution.

The next thing I knew Java was up in the sky, and from where he was I could hear him hollering: "Oww-w-w!"

He began running while he was still up in the air. I could tell, because when his feet touched the ground he was half-way to the pond. I dashed after him. It was the only escape. We tore into the water,

sending up fountains of spray and mud, and didn't stop going till we'd reached the middle.

Actually, it was stretching things a bit, calling the pond a pond. At one time it'd really been a big pond, but that was long ago. All that was left of it now was a very average-sized puddle. We stood in the deepest spot, up to our necks in water.

Contribution, meanwhile, was running circles around the puddle, mooing cow-curses at us. She didn't want to come in after us, because she was a sort of squeamish cow.

The bottom of the pond was covered with slime, and the water was dirty and stank. Java and I stood in the dirty puddle for a long, long time until Contribution finally calmed down and went away. Actually, she was a very kind and noble cow, because she'd tossed Java the Toreador into the air with her head, not with her horns. When we crawled out at last, feeling miserable and looking as filthy as pigs, she didn't say a word about how unkindly we'd treated her, and so the three of us remained friends.

Java never hit her again after that. In fact, whenever his mother gave him some candy, he'd share it with Contribution.

That's the end of the story about his cow.

Now, as we worked away, filling in our subway tunnel, Contribution watched us from the cowshed. She looked very sorry for us. We even thought there were tears in her eyes. Dear old Contribution! You've a big, kind heart. You're the only one who understands us or who cares for us. Thank you, dear old cow!

"Not done yet, you scoundrels?" Grandpa Varava's voice suddenly thundered behind us.

We'd forgotten about being vigilant, and this was our punishment. Ahead was the pigsty wall; dense burdocks grew to both sides; and

Grandpa Varava was behind us. There was no escape. We crouched like chicks caught in a hawk's shadow.

"Don't worry, I won't touch you."

The words pulled us to our feet and straightened our shoulders. The sound of someone pumping a bicycle pump was just us letting out our breath. Our lips turned up in disgusting, pleading sort of smiles all by themselves. But Grandpa Varava paid no attention to them. He didn't like those kind of smiles.

Grandpa Varava was a stern man. His face was as gray and mottled as last year's rotting leaves. His thin lips were turned down and pressed so tightly you'd think they were clamped over a mouthful of water. His eyes had no lashes and were as round and staring as a rooster's. Those round, unmoving eyes gave Grandpa Varava a constantly surprised expression. But it was misleading. There was probably nothing in the world that could ever surprise him any more, for he was eighty-two years old.

"That's enough, you rascals. Go do your homework. You've got an examination coming up."

We made faces. We knew it without his telling us, but we didn't want to think about it. Who'd ever invented exams? And in the spring time, too, when the air was full of the smell of soccer and tip-cat, when all the birds were chirping away, and when it was so sunny and warm that Java and I had already gone swimming three times. How nice it'd been to be in the fourth grade last year! Fourth-graders have no exams. We wished we hadn't been promoted. We'd never taken any exams before. This was going to be the first, and though we made-believe it didn't bother us a bit, we got a funny feeling inside at the thought of it. We'd've gladly filled in twenty subway tunnels to be spared that end-term examination.

"Well, that's all, Grandpa. It's like it was before, isn't it?" Java said uncertainly, tamping down the fresh earth.

His grandfather cocked an eye at our work. We could see he wasn't too pleased, but he said,

"All right, get going. But don't you forget that if I ever catch you at any mischief again I'll whack your ears off and toss them to the pigs!"

He said nothing about cleaning the pigsty, and we didn't want to remind him about it, because it was a job that didn't appeal to us at all. We squeezed by, with our backs smack up against the prickly weeds, and the moment we passed him we lit off, and just in the nick of time, too, for a moment later his rough hand would've come down on our backsides.

Chapter 2

BEYOND THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA
WHO THE KNYSHES WERE

As I live four doors down from Java's house, a minute later we were safe in our garden, though out of breath. We sat under the cherry tree, beside the high wooden fence that separates our garden from the neighbour's. We were so sorry our Metro project was such a flop. But we were never sad for long.

"Let's climb the Great China Wall," Java said.

"Let's."

We scaled the fence.

Our neighbour Knysh had built this huge, three-meter-high fence which Java and I had named the Great Wall of China. The spot where our old cherry tree touched the fence was the only place we could climb it. We'd bored two holes in the planks near the top and often came here to see what was going on in enemy territory.

You may think we'd been badly brought up and were just peeping Toms, but we weren't. You've no idea what our neighbours were like. Would good, normal people ever build such a huge wall to shut themselves off from their neighbours? And you know why they'd done it? Knysh's pear tree grew on the boundary line between our houses, with one branch reaching out over our garden. The pears that grew on that branch would fall on our property, and though we always returned them, our sow would sometimes pick up a few rotten pears by accident (she just couldn't understand what belonged to whom). You couldn't expect us to keep watch over her night and day. Anyway, Knysh had built the Great Wall on account of those rotten pears. Soon after the pear tree went and dried up anyway.

Knysh's wife was big and chunky. Her eyes were as small as button-holes, and her nose was huge and looked like an axe. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I'd never've believed a woman could have a nose like that.

Knysh, however, had a very small nose, but he was awfully hairy. His arms, legs, shoulders, chest and back were all covered with red hair that was as stiff as bristles. There were even tufts of hair growing out of his ears (we wondered how any sounds could get through that dense growth). There was hair growing out of his nostrils, and hair on the bridge of his nose, and even on the tip of it, too.

Besides, Knysh was always damp, like a damp cellar wall. His hands were clammy, his neck was damp, his forehead was moist. Once he clamped his clammy hand on my shoulder and it felt as cold as a corpse's. It made me shudder. *Brr!* Besides, whenever Knysh laughed his nose wiggled, and his forehead wiggled (it didn't crinkle, it wiggled). It was so digusting it made you want to turn away so's you wouldn't have to see it.

The Knyshes had no children or relatives, either.

Knysh and his wife hardly ever worked on the collective farm. He said he was an invalid, and there was a scar on the right side of his stomach. He was always ready to show it to anyone and to tell them the terrible story of how he'd been wounded in action, but no one believed him. They said it was an appendectomy scar, not a wound, and that he'd had his appendix out when he'd been a boy, which was a long time before the war.

Knysh's wife kept talking about how sick she was. She had some mysterious, incurable disease. She'd tell the neighbour women about it in a whisper, rolling her eyes when she said: "I suffer so. Ah, how I suffer."

However, this incurable disease never stopped her from dragging heavy baskets of produce to market every day or from drinking denatured alcohol on holidays. "DT" was what the

Knyshes called that terrible bluish stuff that came in a bottle with a skull and crossbones on the label and the word "POISON" written in capital letters underneath. The Knyshes paid no attention to the label. They had some way of doctoring up their DT to make it drinkable. Knysh was a great specialist in the field.

"DT made in Zhitomir is real rotgut, but the one that's made in Chernigov is good for your health. It's the Ukraine's 'elixir of life'. If you drink it you'll live to be a hundred," he'd say.

The two of them, and especially Knysh, were great drinkers. Knysh drank nearly every day. On holidays, that is, on New Year's Day, Christmas, May Day, Whitsunday, Easter, and also on every other possible day of note such as National Health Day (the Knyshes never missed a single religious or civic holiday) they'd drink together at the table.

On such a day Knysh's wife would come outside and cross herself as she looked up at the TV antenna on top of the community centre. Then she'd go back into her yard, where a table had been laid under the cherry tree, and the gala lunch would be under way. An hour later we'd hear the two of them singing drunkenly beyond the Great Wall, for they always felt like singing after they'd had a few drinks. They'd sing like that for two or three hours: old Ukrainian and Russian folksongs, and modern songs. And then they'd snore right into the evening, making so much noise you'd think there were two tractors with their motors running in the Knyshes' garden.

The Knyshes never invited anyone to these parties. No one ever visited them, and they never visited anyone. They were so stingy they were afraid others might see their possessions, and always played poor.

"I'm as poor as a churchmouse!" Knysh would say. "We live on bread and water. May I drop dead on the spot if it's not the honest truth! We don't even have anything put away for the winter."

And yet, every morning his wife would set out for the market, bent double under the weight of two huge sacks in which there were baskets and milk cans. Their cow was one of the best in the village.

I once heard the women saying:

"My, the milk that cow gives! It's marvellous! It's so thick you can cut it with a knife."

"And no wonder: she feeds it bread. She brings back a sackful from town every day. And you know what's in that sack? White bread! If I fed my cow like that she'd give nothing but cream."

"Humph! But I saw her selling milk at the market. It's so watered-down it's blue. I'll bet it's half-water, no less."

"Why doesn't the militia get after her?"

"They've more important things to do. They've got to catch bandits."

"Isn't she a bandit? She's a bandit if there ever was one."

Yes, something fishy was going on beyond the Great Wall, something Java and I had been aware of for quite some time.

One day we'd heard Knysh saying to his wife in a very mysterious sort of way: "There's going to be a big change in our lives soon. Remember what I told you? The information's right."

And then one evening after dark two tall men came riding up on a motorcycle with a sidecar. They loaded something into the sidecar and roared off. They came back twice again, and each time it was after dark. Then one day Knysh, who'd had quite a lot to drink, shouted,

"I'm not one bit scared of Ivan Shapka! Who does he think he is? He's no farm chairman, he's a ... I've got him right here!" At this Knysh held up his fist. "I've sent in some information about him to the authorities. He'll soon be kicked out, just like this!" And he snapped his fingers.

Ivan Shapka, our collective farm chairman, was a very good

manager and well liked by all. By all except the loafers, idlers and drunks whom he'd always called to account. Knysh was forever sending in complaints about Shapka to the various authorities, and he always made sure his fellow-villagers knew what he was up to. He'd open his gate wide, carry a table into the yard, sit down, tilt his head like a schoolboy, with the tip of his tongue protruding, and start scratching away with his pen on a sheet of paper.

"He's writing another dispatch," Grandpa Varava would snort.

Knysh's complaints never did harm the chairman, but they made ignorant people fear and respect him, since they thought that if Knysh could write those complaints it meant he was a man of power. I knew there was a time when even decent people were afraid of Knysh and his complaints. That's why we felt he was a very strange, mysterious person. However, we became quite confused after we overheard a conversation one day.

During the winter vacation our class went to Kiev on an excursion. On the way to a concert Java and I fell behind "for a sec" to have a quick look at the Ferris wheel (we wanted to have a look at it, even though the rides were closed down in winter). So we dashed off, had a look (what a shame it was shut down!) and were about to rejoin our classmates when we spotted Knysh sitting on a bench beside a man we'd never seen before. Even though Knysh had his back to us and didn't see us we recognized him immediately. What a surprise! What was he doing here in Kiev near the Ferris wheel? We stopped to listen. This is what we heard:

"That'll be twenty-five," Knysh said.

"I can't give you more than twenty," the stranger replied.

"D'you know the risk I'm taking? You think I want to go to jail? Twenty-five."

"Listen, let's both give in a bit: twenty-three."

"I said twenty-five. I can't go down. Understand?"

They stopped talking when they spotted a militiaman coming their way, jumped to their feet and hurried off.

We'd been mulling over the suspicious conversation ever since.

"What d'you think they were talking about?" Java said, shutting his left eye slowly.

"What could it be?" I replied, shutting my right eye.

"Listen," Java said, squinting, "what if Knysh is a spy? What if he was divulging State secrets?"

"If he was, it was awful cheap. Twenty-five rubles for State secrets?"

"How d'you know it was just rubles? Maybe it was thousands, or even millions of rubles."

"You think so?"

"I wouldn't put it past him. We've got to keep an eye on him."

"We sure do."

We began spying on him. Regularly. Nearly every day. So far, however, our observations had not produced any results. Knysh pottered around the house, fed his pigs, cleaned the cowshed, repaired his barn and, unfortunately, did nothing a spy should be doing. To tell the truth, I was beginning to get tired of spying on him. I promised myself that this was the very last time I was climbing the Great Wall.

Once again we saw nothing that was of any interest. Knysh was busy in his garden. His wife was nowhere in sight. She was either inside or not at home. After watching through our peepholes for about five minutes, we were about to climb down when Knysh's wife suddenly came out of the house and said,

"Go have a look down the street and make sure nobody's coming this way. And lock the gate. We don't want those snoops to see us."

We pricked up our ears.

Knysh looked up and down the street, locked the gate and followed his wife back into the house.

"Hear that? See?" Java whispered excitedly.

I didn't know what to say.

"But how will we see what they're going to do?" Java wondered. "Maybe they're going to sew up their spy money in a pillowcase, or transmit something."

"Let's climb over the fence and onto the walnut tree next to the house. We can look into the window from there," I whispered.

"C'mon."

A few minutes later we were up in the branches, peering hard into their window. It was dim inside, so we couldn't make out what was going on there at first. At last we saw Knysh and his wife at the table. They were eating something from spoons. We looked again and then at each other in surprise. The Knyshes were eating ... a cake. An ordinary, store-bought cake with fancy frosting. They were eating it from spoons, just as if it were cereal.

"There! He sold out!" Java whispered.

"Sold what?"

"Sold out his country, the rat! If they're shovelling in cake with spoons it means he's done it!" His voice left no doubt that the cake was proof positive of Knysh's treachery.

We were so excited we never noticed Knysh, who'd come out into the garden, and only did when he was already on the porch, rolling himself a cigarette. This was so unexpected I jumped, making the branch I was sitting on creak. Knysh spotted us.

"What're you doing, tresspassing, you little thieves! You good-for-nothings! Wait till I get you! I'll yank your legs out of your pants! Come on down out of there!" He was standing under the tree now, waving his hands so fast he was blowing up a wind.

Climbing down meant certain death, so we scrambled higher up.

Knysh stood there below in a rage.

"Grown-ups should be good to children," Java called down in a pitiful voice.

"Yes. You should be good to us," I chimed in. My heart sank when I heard the branch crack under me.

"All Soviet people love children," Java went on. "Our teacher said so. And it says so in the papers."

"I'll be so good to you it'll make your hair stand on end! You call yourself children? You're cutthroats, that's what! Children like you should be strangled!" Knysh hollered.

That's when Java said, "Well, you know, we saw you in Kiev. We heard you haggling with that man in the park..."

Knysh stopped shouting. All at once. It was as if someone had turned off a radio. Then he muttered something under his breath and was silent again. He seemed stunned.

His wife, who'd come outside at the sound of his shouting, now stood on the porch and also seemed stunned for a moment, but then she began shouting at him, "Why're you pestering the boys? Look at the poor dears. See how you've scared them."

"Why, what did I say?"

Knysh mumbled. "I wasn't going to hit them. I just wanted to scare them, so's they wouldn't climb our tree."

"Don't be scared, boys. Climb down and run along home," she said kindly.

We didn't have to be asked twice. We slid down, bounded past the Knyshes and out into the street.

"Well?" Java said.

"See how scared he got when you told him? He clammed up right away. That means it's for real."

"Didn't I tell you?"

"And she started purring, that old snake, so's we'd forget all about it."

"Well, we've got to keep an eye on them. We've got to unmask them. No matter what. At any price. Never sparing ourselves. We've got to dedicate our lives to it!"

Too bad we couldn't devote all of our time to unmasking Knysh just then. We had to be at school that afternoon, and we hadn't done our homework yet. We sighed and trudged off to my house to do it.

Chapter 3

THE EXAMINATION

We'd decided to make a submarine from an old, half-sunken, flat-bottomed boat. Naturally, it was another one of Java's ideas.

"We'll bail out the water, caulk and tar it, and make a top out of boards. The periscope'll be here. The hatch'll be here. And we'll need some ballast."

"What about an engine?"

"We'll use oars. It doesn't have to be a speedboat, just as long as it's a submarine."

"How'll we breathe?"

"Through the periscope."

"How'll we surface?"
"We'll drop the ballast and surface."

How swiftly the days passed! We'd barely managed to caulk and tar our submarine (and hadn't yet made a cover, or mounted the periscope) when the day of our examination drew near. It would be the following day. We sat on the bank, boiling tar in a can over a campfire to finish tarring our boat. The tar cooked and bubbled like hot cereal, while somewhere deep inside us a premonition of trouble ahead bubbled, too.

"What's there to worry about?" Java suddenly said, though I hadn't said a thing. "I wouldn't have had time to review the whole grammar book anyway. What's two weeks? Who can learn all that in two weeks? It took people hundreds of years to think it up. Think of all the men that got bald inventing all that grammar. And they expect me to learn it in two weeks."

I was just about to say: "You had a whole year to learn it," but didn't. It was too late in the game now, and I wasn't such a smart fellow myself. I hadn't put much effort into studying grammar either, so I could very well expect a D tomorrow, too. An examination was just that, and who could tell whether I'd come out on top or on bottom?

"Let's go over a few things, just in case," I said.

"It'll only make us more mixed up."

"I saw Karafolka and Grebeniuchka are studying."

"So what? They know it all anyway, so they've got things to brush up on. And we don't know anything, so we don't have anything to brush up on. We have to *learn* it all. And nobody can learn a whole book in one day."

I was glad Java was saying "we". He knew I was always ready to share everything with him, joys and sorrows alike.

We worked on the boat till late that evening.

At last the great day dawned, the day of our very first examination. The school was all decked out. There were runners in the corridors, potted flowers on the windowsills and a red cloth on the teacher's table in our classroom. There was even a banner in the downstairs hall with the word "WELCOME!" on it. The girls all had on their white school pinafores, and the boys all looked strangely clean and combed.

We entered the classroom. I had a sinking feeling, just like I always did before I dived from the willow tree into the river.

We took our seats. There was no hope of cribbing. The bell rang.

Galina Sidorovna entered. She had a fancy hairdo and was wearing a silk dress. Nikolai Pavlovich, our geography teacher, followed right behind her. He was going to be present at the examination, too.

Galina Sidorovna stopped by the board, clasped her hands as if she were going to sing (she looked nervous, too) and said, "Write the words 'Examination Dictation', your name and grade, and 'Vasukovka Secondary School' at the top of the page."

We bent over our papers tensely and began writing.

The examination had begun.

My classmates breathed hard as their pens scratched away. I could feel the perspiration trickling down the collar of my good shirt. What a terror this examination was!

But it was over at last. We filed out of the classroom in silence. Everyone seemed to be dragging his feet, like after a two-day hike.

"How'd you make out?" I asked, walking up to Java.

He shrugged. I could see he hadn't made out very well. All he could hope for now was help from his mother, the deputy.

We were free to go home, but kept milling about in the schoolyard. Everyone was anxious to find out how he'd made out. Galina Sidorovna and Nikolai Pavlovich remained in the classroom to check our work. Even the school mutt Sobakevich

who always raced around in the yard with us now sat silently by the door and seemed as anxious as we were.

Nikolai Pavlovich had come out to smoke on the porch twice, and each time he had said, "Are you still here? Go on home. We won't tell you anything today anyway. Come back tomorrow morning."

Each time we'd stand around for a while, then head for the gate and then notice that someone'd dropped behind.

"Oho," each of us would say to himself. "He'll hang around and find out his mark, while dopey me will be at home. Not on your life!"

And back we'd go. At first we just hung around, but then, to make the time pass more quickly, the girls began playing hopscotch, and the boys began playing tag.

Finally the door opened and Galina Sidorovna appeared. We crowded around her. The boys said nothing, but the girls all chattered together:

"Tell us our marks, Galina Sidorovna! Please! Please tell us!"

Galina Sidorovna shook her head. "Tomorrow, children," she said, but the girls kept at her.

"Just give us a hint."

The teacher smiled and said, "Stop it. Calm down. We'll read out your marks at the parents' meeting tomorrow. Everyone's been promoted... Everyone except..." At this her eyes came to rest on Java, and she continued, "Everyone except Ivan Ren. You'll have to take the dictation again before school starts in September. It's called a re-examination. I couldn't even give you a D. You got an F. It's your own fault. I've spoken to you about your studies often enough."

It pained me to look at Java. He was pale and stared at the ground. Even his deputy mother would be of no help now. Never before had I seen Java, who was always so independent and full of fun, look so humiliated and so like an outcast. Everyone else was excited about having been promoted to the sixth

grade, while all he had to look forward to was a re-examination. I was afraid he'd burst out crying right there and then. He seemed to be afraid of the very same thing. He spun around on his heel and tore off. No one ran after him, not even me. What could I say to him? How could I comfort him? I'd been promoted to the sixth grade, but he had to have a re-examination.

For the first time in our lives our ways had parted. Nothing until the end of August and his re-examination could make us equals again. And who could tell how he'd make out in August? I headed home with a heavy heart, feeling not a bit happy at having passed the very first examination in my life.

I didn't see Java again that day and so don't know how his parents received the news. Naturally, there was no cake for the occasion and no records were played. I do know that his mother didn't attend the parents' meeting the next day. She was probably too ashamed to.

By the way, I got a B for the dictation, and not a C as I'd expected. I felt hot all over from excitement when I learned the news. Still and all, my mark for the year was a C. But all the same, getting a B for the exam was like ... was like winning a lottery jackpot. I'd never dreamed of such luck. I'd probably done it on a wave of nervous excitement.

When the first astonishment had passed it suddenly occurred to me that Java would probably feel hurt when he found out. I began to feel uneasy, as if I'd done something bad, something not at all friendly. But it wasn't my fault. This made me sad, though I personally should've had every reason to be happy: I'd passed my exam, I'd been promoted, and in two days' time I'd be leaving for Kiev to stay with my uncle and aunt for a whole month.

I'd dreamed of going to Kiev with Java, of us visiting the Historical Museum and seeing the Cossacks' arms, and the personal belongings of Kovpak, Rudnev, Kuznetsov and other heroes. In a word, of seeing everything there was to see, as we'd hardly seen anything during our 2-day school excursion.

A whole month in Kiev would be great. I'd talked it over with my father, and my uncle said it was all right if Java came along, but now... His mother'd never let him go. I was nearly certain. But what if... I'd have a try anyway.

I went to see Java. He was sitting outside in his yard, cutting potatoes and beets into a trough for their sow Manuna. It was the kind of hateful job he always tried to get out of. He sat hunched over hopelessly, like an old man, cutting up the bumpy potatoes and the beets with trailing rat-tail roots with a blunt knife. And his face was so ... was so...

He nodded to me and went on cutting up a beet.

"Java," I said in a trembling voice, "it'll be all right."

"Don't worry," he replied softly, never raising his eyes.

I didn't know what to say and so stood around in silence. He, too, was silent. Then, with his eyes still on the ground, he suddenly said,

"Are you going to Kiev?"

"The day after tomorrow. What about you?"

"Me?" he smiled crookedly. "I'm going to Paris, and then to Rio de Janeiro."

I shouldn't've asked. Poor Java. Naturally, he wasn't going anyplace. And everybody else was. Karafolka, for instance, had gone off to a summer camp at the seashore that very morning. Java and I had never been to the seashore. We'd only seen the sea in the movies. How we longed to go! Imagine the sea, the white ships, the seagulls crying over the waves, the albatrosses soaring overhead and a lighthouse beacon winking in the distance! "East by northeast!" the captain'd shout.

Such was the sea.

Last year we'd run away from home and gone off to sea twice, but each time we'd been caught at the railroad station.

Karafolka, however, hadn't had to run away at all. He'd sailed off grandly in a railroad coach, with a seat by the open window. And he'd been eating an ice cream pop on the platform just before. I'd seen him.

"The day after tomorrow," Java said with a sigh. "Well, you'll tell me all about it when you get back." There was this terrible submission to fate in his words. Could this be my bold, brave friend Java?

What had they done to him? To a person like him! You've no idea how good he is at tip-cat, how good he is at soccer, or how bravely he dives into the river from the very top of the old willow. (I'd like to see any of the honour pupils try that!) Ah, nobody understands anything!

Grandpa Varava came out of the house and headed towards the well in their yard near the dip in the fence. He'd not even glanced at us. As soon as the chain rattled, sending the bucket down, who should come walking over from the street side than... Knysh.

"How d'you do," he said to Grandpa politely, stopped and cocked an eye at us. "I heard you've had some trouble. Bad trouble, you might say. Your kid flunked his exam. The only boy in the village who did. My, my!"

Grandpa Varava frowned, but said nothing. Knysh kept at him:

"What bureaucrats these are, even in the schools. You'd think it would've killed them to promote the boy. They probably did it on purpose. They know his ma's a deputy, so they did it just for spite. If you ask me all school does is ruin a boy's health. What's the sense of it? Some fellows get to be engineers and don't own an extra pair of pants, while others can't even sign their names, but have full larders. So you see..."

Grandpa Varava pulled up the pail. "Sorry, I've no time to gab," he said and headed back into the house without even glancing at Knysh.

Knysh made a sour face and walked off.

What a shame that we had no time for him now that we had a re-examination to worry about, and that we couldn't unmask him then and there. But beware, Knysh! We'll get you yet! We'll uncover the whole plot!

Chapter 4

HOW JAVA BECAME ROBINSON CUCKOORUSOE

I set off for Kiev.

What can I say? Naturally, it was a great month. First of all, I went to the Historical Museum, as planned. I went with my uncle who told me all about the history of the Ukraine and the history of Kiev. We spent most of the day in the museum.

I missed Java awfully all that month. I kept thinking about him and feeling sorry that he wasn't there with me.

When I was back home again, I said hello to my folks and dashed over to Java's house. My heart pounded like a hammer as I hurried along. I was nervous. After all, we hadn't seen each other for a whole month. When I reached the yard I saw him sitting there outside the house, bent over the trough, cutting up potatoes, just like he'd been doing the day before I left. You'd think he'd been sitting out there the whole month. I cleared my throat. He raised his eyes and saw me.

"Hey there!" I shouted and slapped him on the back.

"Hey there yourself!" he said and pounded my shoulder.

I began telling him all about Kiev. I was impatient to share all my impressions with him. Somehow, if you don't tell anyone about your impressions, you don't really feel happy. I kept on talking, and he kept on nodding and saying: "Oh", "What d'you know!", "You don't say!", "That's great". It was all so strange to me, because he'd always done the talking, and I'd always done the listening. That was because he has a better imagination than I. Now everything was the other way around. At first I got carried away and didn't notice anything, but after a while I noticed that he was getting sadder and gloomier. Then I stopped short, as if I'd tripped. "And anyway ... and anyway it wasn't so special. What about you? What's Knysh been doing? Did you find out anything else?"

"Naw," Java shrugged. "I hardly saw him at all."

"But how about you?"

He shrugged again and turned away. "Nohow," he said.

"But still. You went fishing, and played soccer, didn't you?"

"No."

"What d'you mean?"

"I didn't go fishing once. Or play soccer. Or tip-cat."

"You're kidding."

"I am not. Ma won't let me go anyplace. All I do is homework and look after the pigs and the cow. I'm a real serf. Like Taras Shevchenko. And I can write a poem like he did: '*I've just turned thirteen...*' "

Java sighed. "It's been hell, Pavlik. I can't take it any more. I'm going to run away."

"Where to?"

"To a desert island."

"Don't be a sap! There's none left."

"There is so. You just don't know."

"How'll you reach it if we couldn't even get as far as the seashore? They'll nab you at the railroad station."

"I'm not going to the station, so they won't."

"What'll you do?"

"I'll go to the marsh. You know how many islands there are in the marsh?"

Indeed, I did. Our marsh is famous. It begins outside the village and stretches off for many kilometres to the south. If you go in there you'll see nothing but reeds as far as the horizon. There are stretches of water, too, and small islands. Sedge and willows grow on the islands, but mostly, it's reeds. There are narrow, winding lanes cut through the reeds just wide enough for a row boat to pass. You could get lost in those lanes. That's why, during the war, partisans were based here, and the Germans could never track them down.

Ducks, teal, snipe and wild geese are as thick as flies there. It's a hunter's paradise, a real El Dorado, as Nikolai Pavlovich,

our geography teacher and a good hunter, says.

"But how'll you live there? You'll die. Remember Gunka?"

Once, long ago, an idiot named Gunka had come to our village and settled there. Nobody knew where he'd come from. He'd go barefoot and hatless summer and winter. The old women said he was a saint. He never bothered anyone, he'd just walk along the village street, laughing and grinning. He liked to wander about in the marsh. He'd be gone for a couple of days and then show up again, looking hungry and thin. He'd even go off to the marsh in winter, when the water turns to ice. He'd go off in a bitter frost and light a huge bonfire on an island, making the villagers think the marsh was burning. But then he'd come back and say, "Whew! I heated the place up real good. Now the village'll be warm." Two years before Gunka had gone off to the marsh like that and never returned. Maybe he'd died, maybe he drowned, or maybe he just continued on his way from there and left the village for good. No one knew for sure. No one ever saw him again.

"D'you want to get lost for good like Gunka?" I repeated.

"I won't," Java said and pulled a book from under his shirt. "There was this man who lived on a desert island, and nothing happened to him. He didn't die."

"What's the book?"

"*Robinson Crusoe*. Ever hear of it? It's real interesting."

"But what's it got to do with the marsh? You've got to think it over."

"I have. I've made up my mind. You know me. I was just waiting for you to get back so's we could talk it over. You've got to help me a little bit."

What could I say? If a person appeals to you for help it's piggish to try to talk him out of it.

"You plan to be on that island long?"

"Robinson Crusoe spent twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days on a desert island," Java said and heaved a sigh.

"Wow! How old'll you be then? Over forty. By that time

we'll be out of school and college, too, Karafolka'll be an academician, and Grebeniuchka'll be an agronomist. I'll be a pilot... if I make it. And you..."

"I've no choice," Java said and sighed again.

"But who'll keep an eye on Knysh? Who'll unmask him? Maybe he really is a dangerous criminal."

Java looked uncertain. I was beginning to feel good, thinking that he'd back down, but he said,

"I haven't forgotten anything. You'll just have to watch him yourself now and unmask him yourself. I can't stay here any more. I just can't."

I said nothing. Then, after a while, I said, "Won't you change your mind? Maybe you don't have to run away from home. Maybe you can get used to things."

"No, I'm a man of my word."

"He should drop dead, that Cuckoorusoe, making you want to run off to a desert island! You mean we won't see each other till we're old men?" I was getting frantic. "Who'll I play tip-cat with? Karafolka?"

Java knitted his brows and stared at me. He was concentrating. After a while he said, "Why won't we? You'll be the only one who knows about the island, and you'll come to visit me. Robinson Crusoe wasn't alone, either. He rescued a savage named Friday, and the two of them lived on the island, so..."

"So I'll be a savage," said I, frowning. "So you'll be the great hero... And I'll be the savage. Some Cuckoorusoe."

"Crusoe, not Cuckoorusoe. It's Robinson Crusoe. Understand?"

"He was Crusoe, but you'll be Cuckoorusoe. The name suits you fine. Remember that time in the corn?"* I said and giggled.

So Java, who was really Ivan, ceased being Java and became Robinson Cuckoorusoe. It must've been his fate to always be known by an invented name.

"What happened in the corn?" you might ask.

* Corn is kukuruza in Russian.—*Tr.*

Chapter 5

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CORNFIELD

One day last spring Java said, "Listen, Pavlik, let's grow a new strain of corn."

I stared at him and wondered if he was sick in the head.

"Corn is an important agricultural crop, and growing new strains is a task of national importance. In general, selectionists are respected people, just like cosmonauts. Take my mother, for example. She's a deputy, and she goes to conferences in Kiev, and she always sits on the stage at meetings."

I listened to him talk on and on and finally couldn't take it any more. "What an idea! You sure thought of a job of work for us to do didn't you?"

He made a face. "You're such a dope, Pavlik. You don't understand a thing. You know what it'd mean to me if I invented a new strain of corn? It'd solve everything! Wow! I wouldn't give a damn for grammar then, or for torn pants, either. As soon as ma'd begin to scold me for a rip, or a tear, or poor marks in grammar I'd come up with a new strain of corn. She'd gasp and forget about everything else in the world. You know corn's her whole life. I'd be out of trouble forever."

Most of Java's troubles, besides grammar, were caused by his pants, which seemed to fall apart on him. Any new pair, even of the toughest material, would turn into rags within two weeks. He was just made like that. He never walked or ran, he flew. If you could compare him with a plane (that's because I want to be a pilot), you could say Java was a jet, doing thousands of kilometres per hour. His trouser legs were the first to buckle under the strain of such speeds and overloads. They'd become so ragged on the bottom they had a fringe. Java'd trim

the fringe with a scissors. He had to keep on playing the barber, and each time his pants would get shorter and shorter. Besides, he was forever getting stuck on something, leaving a swatch of them on each "something", until at last there was nothing left but the belt.

Yes, growing a new strain of corn would solve all his problems.

"It's really very interesting," he said, trying to convince me. "Maybe we'll get to be famous. What's so bad about that! Everyone'll know about us. We'll have our pictures in the papers."

"No," said I. "That's not for me. I want to be a pilot. And there's no such thing as a corn-growing pilot, because corn doesn't grow in the sky. It'll have to be one thing or the other. And anyway, I don't think we'll grow anything amazing. You've got to have the brains for it." At this I tapped my forehead. "And it'll take an awful lot of work. No."

"You talk too much."

"And you don't know what you're talking about."

"And you... I spit on you!"

"And I spit on you!"

It was a serious quarrel. However, we made up two days later. We never mentioned the corn-growing project again. I went visiting relatives in another village, and when I got back Java was gone. He'd also gone to camp, so we didn't see each other till school began in September. By then I'd completely forgotten about the conversation we'd had.

"You know, Pavlik, I did plant a new strain of corn after all," he said.

I gaped. "You're ly... Where? How?"

"On my ma's plot. One day I went up to the attic to look for the little wheel you gave me. You know, there's always millions of dry ears of corn up there. Anyway, I was poking around, looking for the wheel, when I suddenly came upon this ear. It was as big and round as a pig. I'd never seen anything like it

before. That's when I got a brainstorm. Why, it was probably a new strain of corn that had grown all by itself by accident, and no one knew anything about it. Ma probably hadn't noticed it. What luck! It was fate playing into my hands. So I shucked out the kernels. You've never seen the likes of them. If you were hit on the head with one of them it'd leave a bump this big. Anyway, I sneaked off to ma's plot, found the best spot, dug out whatever'd been planted there and planted a whole new row of my own corn. Then I marked the row with two sticks so's I'd know where it was."

"Then what? How'd it grow?"

"I don't know, 'cause I went off to camp. Let's go over today and have a look, huh?"

"All right. 'Specially since they're going to harvest it in a week or so, and after it's in the bin you'll never find it."

This conversation took place during recess. When school was out Java said, "Come on."

"Let's have lunch first."

"Later. This won't take long. We'll just take a quick look and come right back. And you can eat all afternoon if you want to."

He was so impatient that I agreed. What if he really had discovered a new strain? So off we went, out of the village and along the road through the fields. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The sun was shining. It was a warm, pleasant, September sun. The corn grew high along both sides of the road. It was like a three-meter-high green wall. Surely, it was a bumper crop. We walked on and on, out of sight of the village.

"How far is it?" I asked.

"Not far. Just a little bit more."

We walked on for at least another two kilometres after that. At last Java said,

"Here it is. See the marker?"

A plywood marker was nailed to a stick by the roadside. An uneven, hand-written legend read:

Corn
Bukovina No. 1 var.
Nadezhda Ren
8.5 hectares

"Right. This is it," I said.

"Come on. We've got to go inside and head towards the middle," Java said.

We turned off the road and into the corn, with Java leading the way and me bringing up the rear. It felt like we were in the jungle, that's how close together and tall the corn stalks were. We had to part them with our hands to keep them from brushing against our faces, but this was hard to do, because we had our satchels and they got in the way, catching on the stalks. I lost sight of Java from the start and could only tell which way to go by the rustle he was making. After a while, I called out,

"D'we have far to go?"

"No. We're nearly there," Java called back from somewhere far ahead. He was a real jet.

"Wait! Don't go so fast! I can't see which way to go!" I shouted. I'd dropped my satchel twice, and the sharp edge of a leaf had nicked my cheek. "Did you find it?" I shouted after a while.

"Not yet. It's very dense here." He didn't sound as confident as before.

"I know. Get down on your hands and knees and crawl, 'cause you'll never find your markers otherwise." And I got down on my hands and knees, gripped the handle of my satchel between my teeth and began to crawl. I didn't shout to Java again, because you can't do much shouting with a mouth full of satchel. I kept looking every which way, trying to spot his sticks, and finally crashed headlong into Java. He, too, had his satchel between his teeth. We sat down, laid our satchels on the ground and panted.

"Well?" I said.

"You know, it's awfully hard to find anything in this jungle. It's got to be someplace here, but I can't find it."

"Let's do this scientifically. We'll comb through the plot. You crawl one way, I'll crawl the other, and then we'll meet in the middle. The corn's been planted in squares, so we'll comb through it in squares. See?"

Java brightened. "That's right. I always said you were a genius, Pavlik. But let's leave our satchels here, 'cause it's hard going, dragging them around in our teeth."

We left them and crawled off in opposite directions. I kept my eyes wide open as I crawled along, but though I said it'd be easy to search in squares, it turned out to be very hard. If I kept my eyes close to the ground I could just about make out the squares, but when I raised my head a bit all I saw were stalks, and I couldn't very well keep burrowing along with my chin. I crawled on and on, first along a straight line, then zig-zagging, till my knees were sore, but I still couldn't find his markers. "Ja-va-a-a!" I hollered.

"Here!" he yelled from far away.

"Let's turn back!"

"All right!"

I started crawling back. It seemed to me that it was taking me much longer to crawl back than it had to crawl forward. We should've met up long ago, but Java was still out of sight, and even out of hearing. "Java!" I shouted again.

"Here!" his voice came to me from somewhere far to the right.

"Java! What d'you think you're doing? You're crawling in the wrong direction!"

"You're the one who's crawling in the wrong direction! I'm crawling the right way."

"What the heck! Crawl towards me."

"You crawl towards me!"

While shouting back and forth like this, we began crawling

towards each other. It was taking an awfully long time. Finally, we met. We were both as mad as hornets.

"Did you find them?" I asked.

"Find them!" he mimicked. "D'you think I'd ever have come back here if I did? I'd have called you!"

"All right, I've had enough. I'm sick and tired of this whole corn business. I'm going home. I'm hungry. Where's my satchel?"

"Just where you left it."

I lay down on the ground to look, breathing in the dust, but could see nothing. "It's all your fault. Why'd you have to go crawling off like that? We lost our satchels on account of you. We'll never find them in this jungle."

"It is not my fault. You crawled off like a blind kitten, going every which way, and got all our tracks mixed up."

"Listen, we'll fight later. Let's find our satchels first."

So we crawled off in search of them, keeping close together, with my hand on Java's foot as an extra precaution. Half an hour later we realized that it would be no easier to find them in the dense corn-forest than it had been to try to locate the two little sticks Java'd used as markers. My knees were burning. When we finally stood up we nearly toppled over, because our legs were numb and buckled under us.

"Listen, Java, to hell with them. Let's go home. We'll have lunch and come back later. I'm so hungry I can't even think straight. There's this buzzing sound in my head all the time."

"All right," he said quickly. "I feel like my stomach's stuck to my backbone. That's probably why we can't find them, 'cause we're so hungry. After we have some lunch we'll find them in a jiffy, and my markers, too. Come on." He set off confidently, leading the way. Despite our aching knees, we were nearly running. The corn leaves slapped painfully against our hands and faces, but we paid no attention to them. We were starved. The going was getting harder all the time.

"Java," I panted, "don't you think we've been walking for an awfully long time?"

Java said nothing.

"Where's the road, Java?" I said a while later, panting still harder.

Java said nothing.

"We're going the wrong way, Java!" I shouted gasping for breath.

Java stopped. "Well, d'you know which way to go?"

"No," I said, swaying from fatigue. "You got me here, you get me out."

Java sank down to the ground. "I would," he said, taking a deep breath and then stretching out, "I would, if you hadn't gotten me all mixed up. Now I don't know."

"What don't you know? What don't you know, you–you–"

"I don't know which way to go, that's what. This field stretches off till nowheres. If we go the wrong way we can keep on for days and still not come out. We can get lost here forever."

"What? Are you nuts? The corn's not a forest and

it's not the marsh. You can't get lost in a cornfield. Get up off the ground and lead me out of here this minute! I'm hungry! Hear me? I'm hungry!"

"Then get out of here yourself if you think you can't get lost in a cornfield."

"What d'you mean, myself? Your ma's a corn-grower, not mine. My ma's a milkmaid. I can lead you out of a cowshed with my eyes shut."

"Let me rest a while. Look at you, all ready to bawl. And you say you're going to be a pilot! You're no pilot, you're a cry-baby. You're corn mush, that's what you are."

We certainly would have lit into each other if we hadn't been so exhausted and if our situation was not so terrible. We had no right to waste our energy on internecine warfare. I heaved a sigh and stretched out beside Java. That's when I suddenly had an idea.

"What if we climb up and have a look around?"

"Climb up? You think these are trees? This is corn. A cereal crop. I never heard of people climbing cereal crops."

"So what? See how strong it is? Just like bamboo. Maybe it'll hold out."

"Go on and try if you want to."

"You try. You weigh less. And your pants are shorter, and you've got less buttons. I'll give you a boost."

At first Java balked. He was probably mad because it was my idea. He was used to being the great brain. Then he shrugged and said, "All right, let's give it a try."

We chose the tallest, thickest stalk. I braced my back against it and interlaced my fingers to make a step for Java's foot.

"You lean on me and just hold on to the stalk to keep your balance," I said.

"I know," he said and began clambering up me. His knee was on my shoulder, his hands were on my head... Oww! One of his shoes grazed my nose, but I suffered in silence. His other shoe was pressing into my shoulder, with the heel crushing my

collarbone. I began to sway. My knees trembled and began to buckle.

"Hurry! I'm going to fall!"

Something cracked, snapped and screeched. It was like a bomb hitting the cornfield. I lay there with my nose in the dirt, sand in my mouth and ears. I spat it out and shook myself, rubbed my eyes and yelled, "Where are you? Are you alive?"

"Yeh... *Ahchoo!* I am." Java's head appeared from under a pile of broken stalks.

"See anything?"

"Nope. Nothing but corn tassles."

I looked up at the sky and said to myself: "What a joke. Cosmonauts fly around among the stars, way high up in the sky, hundreds of kilometres from the Earth, and nothing happens to them. And here we are, perishing in a cornfield." Aloud I said, "This is crazy, Java. This can't be true, 'cause it's impossible. Nobody in the world ever got lost in a cornfield before. We just went the wrong way. I remember when we started out the sun was shining on our backs. Let's turn back."

At first Java looked at me suspiciously, but I must've spoken very convincingly, because he got up and said, "Who knows? Maybe you're right. Let's go."

And we trudged off. How hard the going was! How hard it was! Our feet felt as if they were made of wood, and we had to set one before the other with great effort, as if they were stilts. Why had we wasted so much time and energy crawling around? It was difficult to say how long we stumbled along: half an hour, an hour, or two hours, or how far we had come: a kilometre, two, or ten. I could take it no more.

"I'm all in, Java. I'm going to drop any minute. Let's rest up a while."

We stretched out on the ground again and lay there for quite some time. It was very still. The only sound we heard was the rustling of the rough corn leaves all around us. A bobwhite

cried out far away, and then all was still again. We couldn't even hear the grasshoppers chirring.

"What if we never get out? Nobody knows we're here. They'll never find us. And we'll die. And in two weeks from now the combine will harvest our bones together with the corn," Java said in a hopeless voice.

"We should've at least had lunch. Then we could've held out longer. This way, we'll die by tomorrow morning." The very thought of lunch made me so hungry I nearly burst into tears.

"I was going to have beet soup and meatballs for lunch today," Java said sadly.

"And we were going to have soup with dumplings and fried chicken," I said, barely able to hold back my tears. I'd come to the end of my rope. "Let's call for help, Java."

But Java was more courageous than I. "You want everybody to laugh at us? Two big kids like us, screaming for help in a cornfield in broad daylight?"

"So what? Just as long as somebody shows up to do the laughing."

"No. If that's how you feel, let's sing something."

"All right."

We began to sing the first song that came to mind. For some reason or other it was a song from a cartoon.

"A grasshopper in the grass..." Java sang mournfully.

"A grasshopper in the grass..." I chimed in, still more mournfully.

We sang on for a long time. We sang nearly every song we knew, and the mournful ones that started with the word "Oh" sounded best: "Oh, There's a Grave in the Field", "Oh, How Wretched I Am", "Oh, Don't Shine Down, Moon", "Oh, Flow Softly, River" and "Oh, I'm All Alone".

We bawled those "Oh's" as if someone was knifing us and also did very well on a song entitled "Vast Is the Sea", and especially on the stanza beginning with the line: "*In vain does the mother await her young son*". We sang the song three times

through, and every time we got to the words "in vain" a lump rose to my throat. At last we got so hoarse we had to stop singing. We lay there grief-stricken and faint with hunger and singing. I put my hand in my pocket mindlessly and my fingers closed around something hard. I pulled it out. It was a candy I'd forgotten about! Besides, it was a peppermint. That meant we wouldn't feel so hot. "Look, Java!" I croaked.

Java glanced at it. "Just one?"

"Yep."

The candy had gone soft around the edges, and the wrapper was stuck so hard I couldn't even pull it off with my teeth. In better days I'd've just chucked it away, but now it was a treasure. I bit it in half carefully, but didn't do a very good job of it, because one half was bigger than the other. There was no sense trying again, as it would simply crumble. I sighed and offered Java the bigger piece.

"Why? Give me that one," he said.

"Go on, take it. You're hungrier than me."

"How come?"

" 'Cause I had a big breakfast. Scrambled eggs, sausages and a glass of milk."

"Me, too! I had a pile of meat and potatoes, and tomato and cucumber salad. That means you're hungrier than me. You take it."

"No. I forgot to say I had a whole apple pie and a saucer of jam. You take it."

"And I had two pies, and a pitcher of milk, and cottage cheese, and sour cream, and..."

"And I had meat patties, and over-ripe pears, and..."

Our breakfasts kept growing bigger and bigger. This competition in nobility ended with Java biting a little piece off the bigger half very neatly so that the two were now even. We began sucking the mints, drawing out the pleasure, but a few minutes later not even a taste remained in our mouths. We were hungrier than ever. And thirstier. Especially thirstier. We soon for-

got all about our hunger. All we could think of was water. Now, we were feeling really wretched. Our parched lips could barely move. The sun was setting. Evening would soon be upon us. A long night loomed ahead. Could we last till morning?

"Forgive me, Pavlik, if I ever hurt you," Java suddenly said tenderly.

He was bidding me farewell.

"And you forgive me, Java, my friend," I said hoarsely. Everything swam before my eyes at the thought of how stupidly our young, beautiful lives were ending. We turned away from each other and sniffled, dropping hot tears upon the dusty ground in expectation of our last hour. I felt pins and needles in my left leg (probably because I was lying in an awkward position). "Oh. One of my legs is going dead. That means the end is near," I said to myself and sniffled louder.

All of a sudden a voice boomed out: "This is Kiev. The time is 6 p.m. You are tuned to the evening news."

We revived instantly.

"It's the PA system in the village, Java! We're saved!" I yelled.

"Come on, let's run while it's on! If they turn it off we'll be lost again!"

And we streaked off, so fast the wind whistled in our ears. We had not gone very far when Java tripped and fell, and I came crashing into him. We sat up in a daze and saw our satchels. It was just like a fairy-tale. We laughed hysterically.

When we reached the village Java said thoughtfully, "You know, a radio's really something."

"So's corn."

Chapter 6

WE SEARCH FOR AN ISLAND

Now you know why Java was really Robinson Cuckoorusoe. Fate intended him to bear this name.

"You mean you want to run away to a desert island today?" I asked.

"Humph! Today!" Cuckoorusoe said grumpily, "First I've got to pick the right kind of desert island and get everything I need, and then I can run away."

"What's there to pick? Take any old island and live there."

"It's all the same to you, but I'm going to be living there twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days. Think it'll be easy?"

"You got me wrong. Sure you can pick the one you want. Right now, if you want to."

"We'll wait a bit. In an hour from now. After Grandpa goes to the store."

"What'll you tell your folks before you run away? They'll be worried. They'll have the whole village out looking for you. I can just imagine it."

"Well, I won't say: 'Dear folks, I'm running away from home to live on a desert island. Be well, and write to me.' I'm not that dumb. That's not the way people run off to desert islands. And anyway, I won't have to tell my folks anything. Ma's going to a conference in Kiev tomorrow, and she'll probably be there for a week. Pa's taking a course in the district centre, so that leaves Grandpa. I'll think of something to tell him. Maybe I'll tell him I'm going to Peski to visit my aunt. My sister's staying with her now. I'll think of something so's he won't raise an alarm."

"But then what? I mean, when your ma gets back and they see you're gone?"

"I don't care. They can look for me all they want to, as long as they don't find me. Remember how they searched for Gunka for three whole days and then stopped? And that was all. Hardly anyone ever talks about him now. It'll be the same when I'm gone." The thought that he'd soon be forgotten by all was probably a bitter one, and he quickly changed the topic of conversation. "The main thing is to find a good island where the fishing's good and the hunting's good..."

"You mean you're taking your gun?"

"Sure. Robinson Crusoe had a couple of guns. But I'll manage with one. You know my shotgun. It's much better than Grandpa's German one."

He was exaggerating, of course, but I didn't argue. Here he was, running away to a desert island for twenty-eight years, so he might as well have it his way.

The year before his grandfather had given him a shotgun for his birthday and had begun taking him along when he went hunting. Java was very proud of his single-barrelled gun and of the fact that he went hunting like a grown man. I envied him and dreamed of owning a shotgun, too.

Someone coughed inside the house. The door creaked open and Grandpa Varava came out into the yard. He flashed an angry look at us and said, "I'm going to the store for a few minutes, and I don't want any monkey business. Hear me?"

"We're not doing anything. Maybe we'll just go for a swim, 'cause it's hot," Java said in a wheedling kind of voice.

"You've got lessons to do, so forget about swimming, you loafer," the old man snapped and climbed over the dip in the fence with a grunt.

I looked at my friend doubtfully.

"Don't worry, we'll go," he said softly. "I know him. He'll see Grandpa Salivon there, and they'll sit around yakking for hours. Help me finish up the beets. Then we can go."

We quickly cut up the remainder of the beets, dumped them into the pig's trough and set out.

Although there was nothing strange about us paddling in the marsh (we'd done so many times before when we went fishing, or just for the fun of it), this time we crept stealthily towards the river, glancing back over our shoulders ever so often. We didn't take a single one of the good boats, though they were all tied up on the bank and we were allowed to take them. There was my pa's boat and Grandpa Varava's three boats (two flat-bottomed ones and a canoe). Instead, we undressed and swam across to a little sandy island where, hidden behind a large pussy willow bush, was an abandoned old wreck of a flat-bottomed boat. We'd intended to make it into a submarine, but never did. However, as you recall, we'd caulked and tarred it just before our exam, and though it still leaked, it wouldn't sink if we remembered to bail out the water. In fact, it'd be quite seaworthy. There was a long cracked paddle under the boat. We'd "borrowed" it from Grandpa Varava. He'd never miss it, as he had about a dozen paddles in his shed, short ones for the canoe and long ones for the flat-bottomed boats. It took know-how to paddle, and if you didn't know how, you could easily turn over and become fish food. But Cuckoorusoe and I had known how to paddle ever since we were babies, so it was no problem to us.

"Don't forget the can, or you'll have to bail with your mouth. The old wreck still leaks," said Java.

We pushed off into the river, rounded an island and entered the reeds, moving along a narrow lane. Cuckoorusoe paddled. I might've, too, but he was better at it. He paddled slowly and carefully, keeping his eyes peeled on the winding, twisting strip of water. A sharp shove would send the bow deep into the reeds, and it was some job to back out again.

Cuckoorusoe was a good oarsman and never cut into the reeds.

I lay in the bow, gazing at the water. It was so clear I could see the bottom: the water weeds, the roots of water lilies, sunken trees and fishes darting about. It was fascinating.

We headed farther and farther into the marsh. Suddenly we turned a bend and came upon a broad, open stretch of water. Its surface was as smooth as smooth could be. There were white and yellow water lilies floating in little clusters, just like on the pictures for sale at the market, except that here there were two canvasbacks swimming around instead of white swans. The moment the ducks saw us they disappeared, diving so quickly it made you wonder whether you'd actually seen them at all. Then they reappeared again about twenty metres away, making you think it was another pair.

We soon entered another lane in the reeds Swoosh! Swoosh! Some ducks flashed by. The hunting season had not yet begun. That's why the ducks, who'd never heard the sound of shot, were flying overhead.

"Too bad I didn't take my gun," Cuckoorusoe said.

"Yea."

The marsh was indeed a hunter's paradise. I could imagine how many hunters there'd be the first day of the season. And those four men would come from Kiev again, the ones that came every year and stayed at Grandpa Varava's house. One was very tall and wore glasses. His name was Oleg. Then there was the short one named Sidorenko. And the broad-faced, nearly bald one whose name was Zadvizhka. And fat Batiuk, who had no hair at all. They were all some kind of scientists.

According to custom, the night before the opening of the hunting season they'd sit around drinking vodka, telling tall tales, singing and kidding each other. At the crack of dawn Grandpa Varava'd wake them up. They'd scramble into their hunting duds, wince and moan, since they'd all have hangovers, and shiver in the cold. Batiuk, as always, would say he wasn't getting up. He'd pull his hat over his face and mumble in a hoarse and sleepy voice,

"Go back to sleep. What'd you all jump up for? It's the middle of the night. We just went to bed..." and he'd start snoring again.

They'd keep on shaking him till he'd kick out and yell: "Go on! I'll catch up with you." At last, he'd curse and get up. Then they'd set out for the marsh, with Grandpa in the canoe and the rest of them in the flat-bottomed boats. Grandpa'd have to stop and wait for them every few minutes, because instead of moving forward they'd be moving in jerky zig-zags: if they paddled from the left the boat would shoot off to the right; if they paddled from the right it would shoot off to the left. And so it was at every stroke, while Grandpa's canoe moved along a straight line. Oh, what a canoe he had! It was as light as a feather and skimmed across the water like a gull. Like the new hydrofoil boats. Still, there was hardly a person alive except Grandpa Varava who could keep his balance in it, for it was as wiggly as an eel. Paddling in his canoe was like walking a tightrope: you had to think about keeping your balance every single second.

The year before a whole slew of hunters had arrived for the first day of the season, and all the boats were taken. The four scientists from Kiev didn't arrive till late at night, and so there was no boat for them, nothing but Grandpa Varava's canoe.

"The canoe won't take two grown men nohow. It'll sink," Grandpa said. "I'd take you to your stations if it'd hold two."

"We can go one at a time," said Zadvizhka.

"Right," said Grandpa. "But how d'you think we'll get the canoe back each time?"

"Hm," said Zadvizhka.

"What if we get the boys to help us?" Oleg suggested.

"I don't want you to drown my boys," Grandpa muttered.

"They won't! You'll see!" I cried. "We're light. We'll

ferry them across. And even if we turn over, you know we can swim like fishes."

"Well, maybe we'll give it a try," Grandpa said. "But strip down to your trunks, boys, because I think you're going to get a ducking."

As I was the first one out that morning, I was the first to be ferryman. I ferried Oleg, though that's not really the word for it, since we turned over right by the bank, before we even nosed into the river. He'd just gotten in and was settling down when we turned over, and though it was very shallow by the bank, he managed to go under.

"That damn canoe! It's a man-trap, that's what it is!" he sputtered as he climbed up onto the bank.

His friends laughed. Sidorenko, who drawled when he spoke, said,

"Ca-a-n't sit still! You'd think you had a-ants in your pa-a-nts! Let me get in." And he climbed into the canoe.

"Sit right down on the bottom," Grandpa said.

But there was water on the bottom, and Sidorenko didn't want to get his pants wet. "I don't want to end up with lumbago," he said, put a board across the sides and sat down.

Grandpa steadied the canoe while we got settled. Then he shoved us off. I began paddling slowly. We were on our way. Sidorenko sat up as straight and stiff as the best pupil in our

school. He held his gun out in front of him with both hands, balancing like a circus tightrope-walker.

"He's sitting very still. We'll make it," I said to myself. We'd just reached the middle of the river when three ducks swooshed overhead. Sidorenko jerked up his gun (he was a hot-blooded hunter), but never fired a shot, as we were now offbalance and tilting sharply.

"Watch out!" I shouted. "We're turning over!"

His hand went *Slap! Slap! Slap!* on the water, but who could ever grab hold of water for support? *Kerplunk!* The last thing I saw was a pair of new rubber wading boots flashing through the air and disappearing beneath the surface. The moment I found myself in the water I bobbed up again and grabbed hold of the overturned canoe. A moment later Sidorenko's head appeared. I couldn't see his face, because his wet hair was plastered to it.

"My gun!" he gurgled and disappeared again, like a float when a fish is biting. Then he popped up again, and gurgled: "My gun!" again and disappeared again.

"What's up?" the men on the bank shouted cheerfully.

"I think he drowned his gun!" I shouted.

At this Sidorenko popped up for good, spat out some water and bellowed, "It's go-o-ne! It's pri-ice-less!"

We barely made it back to the bank. I pushed the canoe and the paddle, and he... I was afraid he might drown himself, what with being so grief-stricken. He kept moaning as he swam, "O Lord! What a gun! What a gun!"

"Never you fear. We'll find it," Grandpa Varava said, trying to comfort him when we'd climbed out again. "The boys'll dive for it and find it."

Java and I swam out to the middle of the river and started diving, but we couldn't find it. The bottom was covered with silt, and the gun had sunk into it. It would never be found.

Grandpa Varava'd been trying to comfort Sidorenko, but when we got back empty-handed, he got mad at him, as if

Sidorenko'd lost Grandpa's gun. "Why'd you jerk like that? Huh? You should've sat still. If you were being ferried, you should've sat still. But no, you wanted to get some ducks. You wanted to be the first. No one's fired a shot yet, but there you were, hopping around. What a gun you lost! You can't be trusted with a good gun! You should be shooting a cap pistol, that's what!"

Sidorenko looked awfully ashamed, but he didn't try to justify himself. He wasn't even angry at Grandpa for scolding him (an important scientist!) as if he were a schoolboy. When they were out hunting and Grandpa got excited he'd often holler at them or make fun of them, but they never got mad at him. They couldn't afford to, because Grandpa Varava knew the marsh like the palm of his hand. During the war he'd been the partisans' guide. They called him "our chief pilot". All the hunters knew that if they were in Grandpa's party they'd never come back without a good bag.

The hunters from Kiev would surely come to stay with Grandpa Varava again this year. No doubt about it.

"Listen," I said, gazing into the water, "d'you think a gun'll be ruined if it's been in the silt for a couple of years? Or d'you think after you oiled it, it'd be good again?"

"It can lie in the silt a thousand years, and nothing'll happen to it. What d'you think archeologists would do if nothing was ever preserved in the ground or under water? They'd all be out of a job, that's what."

"I wish we could find that gun. It's a rare gun. Champions fired it at shooting contests. You think he moaned about it like that for nothing?"

"You'll never find it, 'cause it's been sucked down into the silt. You'd have to drain the river to find it. Maybe archeologists'll find it in three hundred years from now, but they'll never know we saw it sink and dived after it."

"And nobody'll ever know that you ran away from home to

live on a desert island and lived there for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days. Maybe the island'll even disappear by then."

"Don't worry, it'll be there."

We had again reached a rather large stretch of water, so large there were little waves and whitecaps on it (a wind had just blown up), just like in a real sea. This was the fifth large area of water we'd come to, and we'd already passed nearly a dozen little islands. Each time I had said: "How about this one? See what a nice desert island this is? What else d'you want?" But Cuckoorusoe had his own opinion on the subject, and none of the islands suited him. There were various reasons for this. One island was too small. Another was too densely covered with reeds near the banks, making it hard to reach the water. A third was treeless. How would he make a campfire if he had no firewood? And so on.

We'd just reached another island. It looked like a green hill, because it was covered with tall bushes, weeping willows and poplars, and there were gaps in the reeds that grew on the banks. Three sides of the island faced on clear water.

"I think this is it," Cuckoorusoe said. "Let's dock here."

"Right!" I said happily, for I'd gotten pretty tired of searching.

We nosed into the bank. It was a wonderful island. You'd think it was just made for the kind of project Cuckoorusoe had in mind. There were lots of trees and brushwood to last for exactly twenty-eight years. Ducks were quacking in the reeds. That meant the place was teeming with waterfowl. Fish splashed around near the bank, just waiting to become chowder. The clearing in the middle of the island was big enough to play soccer in, to say nothing of tip-cat, and the branches of a huge weeping willow that grew at the edge of the clearing reached down to the very ground. This was a fine place to find shelter from the rain even if you didn't have a tent. But Cuckoorusoe'd have to build a brushwood tent.

"I'll help you make a tent," I said. "You know I'm good at it." It was the honest truth. None of the village boys was better at tent-making than me. My pa'd taught me, and he's a carpenter. He built half the houses in our village.

Cuckoorusoe looked doubtful. "Robinson Crusoe did everything himself. He landed on a desert island all by himself, you know."

"He was Robinson *Crusoe*, but you're *Cuckoorusoe*," I objected. "Everything doesn't have to be exactly the same."

As I was anxious to help my friend and Cuckoorusoe didn't argue the point, I took my large, wooden-sided penknife from my pocket and began cutting willow whips. I like my knife very much and always keep it in my pocket. That's why the wooden sides are so polished they look like they've been lacquered.

Cuckoorusoe helped me, carrying out my orders, accepting my leadership in the project. He brought me whips, cleared a space for the tent and sharpened the ends of the sticks for the frame. In a word, he did all the dirty work.

Some time later we had a fine tent under the old willow. It was spacious and strong enough to weather any storm or hurricane, and so cozy I would have loved to live in it myself. I was very pleased with the results of my work. "You won't have to repair it even once in twenty-eight years. I'll give you a guarantee," I said.

We suddenly recalled that Grandpa Varava was probably back from the store by now and set out for home in a hurry. We pulled up to shore, hid the boat, and dashed off to Java's house. The old man hadn't yet returned. Cuckoorusoe was right: Grandpa Varava's "a few minutes" usually meant a few hours.

"Well, since Grandpa's out, I can pack everything I'll need now," he said. "We'll pack today and put everything in the boat. And tomorrow..."

"You mean it's going to be tomorrow?"

"What's the use of putting it off? Ma'll be back in a few

days, and that'll complicate everything." He was walking up and down the room looking thoughtful as he pondered over what he'd need. "First of all, I'll need a wooden spoon." He found a nicked old spoon in the sideboard and stuck it under his belt. "And salt. I'll be a goner if I don't have any salt." He poured half a package of salt into a piece of cloth and tied it up. "And bread." He looked sadly at the hard crust lying on the table. "It won't be enough."

His grandfather had gone to the store for bread.

"I'll bring you some. Some bread and some crackers," I offered.

"What about tea?" He fingered a packet of tea. "No, I'll manage without it, or I'll have to take the teapot. We only have one."

"Don't forget your flashlight. It'll come in handy."

"I know. It's something I'll really need." He walked across to the door and picked up the axe that was standing upright in the corner. "And I'll need at least two axes. Robinson Crusoe had twelve."

"What'd he do with all those axes? Juggle them? Why'd he need so many? That Robinson sure was a freak."

"You think you're so smart." Cuckoorusoe sounded offended. I'd just slighted his idol. "Pipe down. You never lived on a desert island."

Just then the door opened and Grandpa Varava came in. Cuckoorusoe froze, axe in hand.

"Ah," Grandpa Varava said calmly. "Were you getting ready to hack up the furniture? Go put it back where you got it."

"I was just– uh– uh– showing Pavlik our axe. He says theirs is better. Isn't ours better, Grandpa?"

His grandfather said nothing. We slipped by him and out of the house.

"That sure was a close shave!" Java gasped when we reached the far side of the shed. "How come we didn't hear him coming?"

It really was strange and could only mean we'd been completely carried away, because you could hear Grandpa Varava coming a long way off. You'd think he was skiing, to look at him, because he walked without raising his feet from the ground and made loud scraping sounds at each step. What with walking so stiff-legged, you'd expect him to topple over any minute. But you should've seen him when he was out hunting! Why, he could follow a hare in that scraping way of his for fifty kilometres over rough ground and never bat an eye.

We sat there behind the shed, discussing the best way of transferring Java's belongings to the boat, and finally decided he'd take one thing out of the house at a time and hide it in the burdocks beyond the shed. Then, as soon as it got dark, I'd sneak everything into the boat (so Cuckoorusoe wouldn't have to leave the house and arouse his grandfather's suspicion). And the next day...

Chapter 7

ROBINSON CUCKOORUSOE LANDS ON A DESERT ISLAND

It was the morning of the following day, a bright, sunny, noisy morning: roosters were crowing, geese were cackling, cows were mooing and the women were rattling their pails by the well.

I crouched by the wattle fence, peeping through a crack to see what was happening in my friend's yard.

The preparatory work had been completed, and all of Cuckoorusoe's belongings were now stashed away in the boat: his gun, fishing rods, flashlight, wooden spoon, ice skates (for winter), an axe (just one, and an axehead without a handle at that, but no matter, he'd cut himself a handle on the island), and all kinds of odds and ends. I'd dug a whole can of worms for him. It was a sprats-in-tomato-sauce can (I crossed out the word "sprats" and wrote "worms" over it, so it was now "worms in tomato sauce"). There was a whole backful of food and even two aspirins in case of sickness. We were ready. Now all Jave had to do was get his grandfather to let him leave for a couple of days.

Grandpa Varava was sitting on a stump, making a handle for his pitchfork. Java slouched around him.

"Grandpa!"

"Eh?"

"Let me go visit Aunt Ganna in Peski."

"Quit pestering me."

"Grandpa?"

"Eh?"

"I'll be going. All right?"

"I said quit pestering me. Go do your lessons."

There was a short pause. Then he started in again.

"Grandpa!"

"Eh?"
"I'm bored here with you."
"Want me to stand on my head to amuse you?"
"I'll go visit Aunt Ganna. Irina's there. I haven't seen her for ages."
"When she's home all you do is fight. Now, all of a sudden, you miss her."
"And I'll bring you back some home-grown tobacco. You know how good Aunt Ganna's tobacco is."
"Mine's no worse. Quit pestering me."
There was another pause.
"Grandpa!"
"Eh?"
"Well, I'll be going. All right?"
"Quit nagging! What about your lessons?"
"I'll take my book along and study there. You can ask Aunt Ganna later."
I was listening to every word, saying to myself, "It sure is hard to run off to a desert island in our days."
Java went on nagging. At last his grandfather's patience gave out.
"You're a devil, that's what!" he said. "Nagging the life out of me. Go on, get out of my sight! You can go for three days, no more. And if Aunt Ganna says you didn't do any studying, I'll whack you with this here stick, you good-for-nothing!"
Java didn't have to be told twice. He dashed into the house before his grandfather had a chance to change his mind, snatched up his grammar book and dashed out again, out through the gate. All of a sudden he stopped, turned, shifted his weight and said, "Be well, Grandfather. You're real nice... I always knew you were real nice..."
"Go on," Grandpa Varava muttered. He had no way of knowing that Cuckoorusoe was bidding him farewell for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days.
I joined my friend out on the street. We walked down to the

river in silence, got into our boat in silence and set off for the marsh in silence, reaching the island without having spoken a word. In silence, we carried all Java's things from the boat to the tent.

Now, for the last time, we stood on the bank beside the boat, heads lowered and poking at the ground with the tips of our shoes. It was a difficult moment. We had to say goodbye, but we didn't know the proper words for such an occasion. After all, we weren't saying goodbye for a month, or even for a year. We were saying goodbye for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days. No one in the world had ever had to say goodbye for so long.

"What're you waiting for? Go on," Cuckoorusoe said at last.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"No, but I mean... You've got to be back home. The kids're probably playing soccer in the pasture."

"Who cares?" I said, letting him see that I didn't care one bit about the kids or soccer. To myself, however, I was saying, "Won't Cuckoorusoe ever play soccer again? Poor him!" I felt very sorry for him. He was such a good goalie. I stuck my hand in my pocket and drew out my penknife. "Here. It'll come in handy. You know my knife. It's like a razor. Nobody else has one like it. And yours has a broken blade."

Cuckoorusoe turned pink with pleasure. He'd been eyeing my knife enviously for years and he'd often suggested we trade, but I'd never agreed to it. But now I wanted him to have it, since he'd never be playing soccer again and would be living all alone by himself.

I sighed, put my other hand in my other pocket and pulled out a matchbox in which I had my special fishhooks, the ones my uncle in Kiev had given me. They were wonderful hooks, a real treasure. There were little ones, medium-sized ones and large ones. "You can have these," I said. "You'll always have fish if you use these. But when I come to visit you some day, let me fish with them, too, 'cause I'm used to them."

I don't know why I said that, since I'd never used them before. Probably because I was sorry to give them away, even more so than my penknife. Cuckoorusoe must've sensed it.

"You don't have to give them to me. I've got my own," he said. But he couldn't take his eyes from the box. How could a person refuse such a gift?

No matter how sorry I was, I wasn't that sorry.

Cuckoorusoe would be all alone by himself on the desert island, as solitary as Grandpa Salivon's only tooth. And no one would ever see him again. No one would ever write to him. Ever. Because he didn't even have an address. Everybody else in the world had an address, but he didn't. This sudden thought worried me.

"Listen, something's wrong. You won't have an address any more. No address at all."

"So what?"

"What d'you mean? Can't you understand? You won't have an address! It's like you're not living anyplace."

"It's not my fault."

"We've got to name the island. Right now. If it's got a name, you'll have an address."

"All right. I'm all for it. What'll we name it?"

"How do I know? Every island has a name. There's Sakhalin Island, Madagascar Island, Taimyr Island. Uh ... I think Taimyr's a peninsula, though. Something like that."

"Well, this'll be Madagascar Island. It sounds nice. I like it."

"There's already one. It has to be a new name."

Cuckoorusoe began to think. His lips moved as he went over the various names in his mind. At last he said, "You know what? I'll call it Re-examination Island. My re-examination's what made me come here, so that's what I'll name it. I'll bet you anything there's no other island named that in the whole world."

I didn't argue. And so a new name appeared on the map of the world (although no one except us knew about it yet): Re-

examination Island. Perhaps, many years from now, schoolchildren would read about it in their geography books. "Re-examination Island is famous as the site where Robinson Cuckoorusoe, a fifth-grade pupil, spent nearly thirty years in complete isolation." And some dunce would get a D for not knowing it.

These thoughts cheered me up and brightened our moment of parting. "Cheer up, Robinson. It'll work out fine," I said. "Why, you can live on an island like this for a hundred years, as long as the fish are biting."

"That's what I say."

"So long."

"So long."

I got into the boat and shoved off.

Now Robinson Cuckoorusoe's only link with civilization was broken. He was alone on a desert island now, and even if he suddenly decided to return home, he'd be unable to do so without help, because he had no boat, and you could never get out of the marsh without a boat. You'd surely drown. I'd told him to take the submarine (we could've used one of the other boats for ferrying him across to the island), but he'd refused.

"That's like it's not for real," he had said. "It'll be like an excursion, and when I get tired, I can go back home. If Robinson Crusoe had a boat he wouldn't've stayed on that island all by himself for so long. No. It's got to be for real. No boat, and no chance of going back."

Yes, indeed, my friend Robinson Cuckoorusoe was a hero.

Chapter 8

THE FIRST DAY ON RE-EXAMINATION ISLAND
A STORY TOLD BY ROBINSON CUCKOORUSOE
TO HIS FRIEND AND CLASSMATE PAVLIK

Well, when you shoved off and disappeared beyond reeds and there were only wrinkles left on the water it suddenly got very quiet. I'd never heard anything as quiet as that before (not even when I was deafened when I first fired my gun). I stood there like I'd turned to stone and couldn't even breathe. All I could hear was that quiet. I didn't know what to do. There was no place to go and nothing to do. I could sit or stand, or do somersaults. It wouldn't make any difference. No one'd see me anyway. No one cared what I was doing.

I began feeling bad, mainly because I kept thinking about being stranded on the island. I could shout, or hit my head against a tree: it wouldn't change a thing. I don't know what I'd've done if I hadn't started feeling hungry all of a sudden. You know what a rush I was in before I left. I didn't even have a decent breakfast. That brought me to my senses in a jiffy. I decided not to use up any of the food I'd brought, 'cause I didn't know how things would turn out. I'd catch some fish. I found a good spot, baited my hooks and cast my lines. Then I began waiting for a bite. I sat there, watching my floats and waiting. I waited and waited, and waited. The floats never moved. I didn't even have a nibble. I spat on the worms before I baited my hooks, I changed the worms and tried a couple of different places, but the fish werent't biting. I was getting hungrier and hungrier. I had this empty feeling in my stomach. "Come on, fish! Come on, fish! Please! I'm hungry," I kept whispering. But the floats just stuck up out of the water like nails sticking up in a board. There was no fish. My lunch was swimming around someplace, but I couldn't get at it.

I began jerking the lines, but all I pulled up were my own baited hooks. There was no food in sight but the worms. Ugh!

It was a bad time for fishing. I know you've got to go early in the morning or after the sun goes down, but I had no choice. I couldn't wait till evening, I'd be sure to die of starvation by then. Then my hook caught on a log and my line snapped. Goodbye hook, one of the best you'd given me. I got mad and stamped off to my sack of food. I just couldn't wait any more. When I got to it I wolfed down half the sack. Then I stretched out in the clearing, and dozed off. Finally, I fell asleep. I must've slept for a long time, because I suddenly felt I was roasting and woke up. The sun was blazing! I touched my face. My cheeks were as hot as fire. I had a terrible burn. I splashed cold water on my face, but it still burned. I put wet earth on it, but it still burned. Then I remembered that sour cream or sour milk were good for a sunburn, but where could I get any? That's when I first really felt that a desert island is just that. It's not our collective farm, where there's mountains of sour cream. All I needed was just a spoonful, or half a spoonful. Boy, was it ever hot! I crawled into the tent. It was dark inside, and cool. I lay there for a while. Even though my face burned, I had to go on living. After all, I couldn't spend twenty-eight years lying on the ground in a tent. I crawled out, took the axehead and your knife and went off to cut down an axe handle. I found a good dry branch, cut a stick the right size and began shaping it. I suddenly got a splinter in my finger. It was the real painful kind, right under my nail. I began to suck my finger, but it wouldn't come out. Then I tried to get it out with my teeth, but it still wouldn't come out. What I needed was a needle. That'd get it out right away. But

where could I get a needle? I'd have to go back home for one. "Go on, run. Why're you sitting here?" I said to myself.

I was so mad I could cry. Imagine, forgetting to take along a needle! I picked up one of the hooks and began poking at the splinter carefully. I didn't want the hook to get stuck in my flesh. Then I'd have a splinter *and* a hook in my finger! I worked at it so hard I broke out in a sweat, but I didn't get all of the splinter out anyway. A tiny piece remained. It made my finger sore for a long time. It's a good thing it didn't get infected.

The sun began to set, and I got hungry again. I was afraid to even look at my sack. I knew that if I went over to it I'd have nothing to eat but grass the next day. Fish was the only thing that could save my life.

I cast my lines again. This time I was lucky. You can't imagine how happy I was, Pavlik, when I pulled in my first gudgeon. It was only as big as my finger, but it made me happier than the huge pike we caught last summer. I even kissed it. Then I caught some baby perch and carp. I was so excited I never noticed when my can of worms turned over. By the time I did, they'd all crawled away. Imagine! There'd be no fish if I didn't have any worms. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled around, picking them out of the grass, but most of them had burrowed into the ground by then. Anyway, it was getting too dark to see. I only had about a quarter of a can left. I didn't fish any more. I decided I'd ration the worms.

I made a fire, cleaned the fry I'd caught and began cooking some chowder in the old pot. The water kept boiling out fast, so I had to keep adding more all the time. Something was hissing underneath the pot. I got down to look and saw that it was leaking! Why hadn't I noticed the hole before? I could've howled. Now what? That old pot was only good for mixing clay, not for cooking chowder. It was more of a sieve than a pot. But it was the only one I had. I couldn't get another. This was a desert island.

Robinson Crusoe was lucky. The sea cast everything he needed up onto the shore after the shipwreck. Including money.

All he had to do was wish for them and he had twelve axes. If he wished for a silk shirt he had silk shirts. All I wanted was one small pot. A tiny little pot. Oh, no! There'll never be a shipwreck in the marsh. Not on your life! Not even in a hundred years. The only real shipwreck was when that hunter Sidorenko from Kiev lost his gun. What good was it to me? I had my own gun. So there was no use my counting on a shipwreck.

I ate the half-cooked chowder and nearly gagged. Then I chewed on some half-cooked fish. It was very dark by then, but still I sat there. I couldn't see a single star. It was a cloudy night. The only light came from the last of the coals in the fire. I had a cold, clammy feeling in my stomach, and a slippery, awful sort of fear crept up from there to my heart. I'd have to do something and get distracted. I went into the tent, felt around for my flashlight and turned it on. Then I found my notebook (you know, I took my grammar book and notebook along so Grandpa'd think I was studying at my aunt's. Then I found a pencil in my sack. If you think I intended to study, I didn't. Robinson Crusoe kept a diary when he was on the desert island. He wrote down everything that happened to him. I was just like him: I was on a desert island, too. You can't manage on a desert island if you don't keep a diary.

But I couldn't write every single thing down. That was asking too much of me. I'm no writer. In fact, I'm supposed to have a re-examination in grammar. So I decided I'd just list the good and the bad things that happened to me. I drew a line down the centre of the page. At the top of the left side I wrote *Adventures* (that was the good things. That's why I went off to a desert island in the first place. My life would mean nothing if there weren't any adventures in it, especially on a desert island). At the top of the right side I wrote *Bad things* (too bad they always seem to happen). I thought about what I'd write for a long time

and chewed on the end of my pencil. This is what I finally wrote:

Adventures	*Bad things*
I caught some fish and ate it.	1. I got sunburned.
	2. I got a splinter under my nail.
	3. I lost a hook (one of my best).
	4. I ate half a sackful of food.
	5. Most of my worms crawled away.
	6. The pot leaks, and I don't know what I'll use for cooking chowder.

So you see, there was only one small adventure, as small as that first gudgeon (I even included it as an adventure out of the goodness of my heart). But there were six bad things and all of them as big as sharks.

I wrote all this as I leaned my notebook on my knee and worked the flashlight with my other hand, because the fire'd gone out, and I didn't want to build another one (and don't think it was because I hated going off into the dark for firewood).

Your flashlight is really everlasting. Thanks a lot. But that whirring... You whirr, and you have some light. You don't whirr, and you have no light. I whirred. For half an hour after I could hear that whirring in my head, and my hand went numb. After I got through writing I thought the day was over and nothing more would happen, but I didn't know the biggest adventure still lay ahead. This was no shark. It was a whale.

I wasn't sleepy, because I'd had all that sleep during the day. I crawled out of the tent, sat down on the bank and began to think. My head was full of thoughts about the village, about school, and about you. What were you doing now? You were probably sound asleep.

The new moon came out from behind a cloud. It was as curved as a Turkish sword. It made the water look sort of silvery. Some ducks that I couldn't see in the dark swooshed by. Then everything was quiet again. There was no wind, so the reeds weren't rustling. I kept thinking about everything and looked at the water.

All of a sudden a very long shadow fell across the water, and a boat sailed out from behind the reeds. It was like a ghost ship. It didn't make a sound, not even a little splash. That was the spookiest part. It was like I was dreaming. Somebody very tall was standing in the boat, paddling. I blinked a couple of times to make sure I wasn't seeing things. I wasn't. The boat was heading straight towards me, getting bigger and bigger, like things do that are coming towards you on the screen in the movies. When it got very close it turned and disappeared beyond the bushes.

Was my heart pounding! Who was it? A bogey-man? A water goblin? The devil? I sure am stupid! Only ignorant old women believe in that kind of stuff. I believe in radios, TV and rocket ships. It's all silliness. There was nothing to be afraid of. Then all of a sudden I thought of Gunka. Crazy Gunka who got lost forever in the marsh two years ago. What if it was him? What if he's still living in the marsh on some desert island, just like me? Why, he's crazy. He never knows what he's doing. He might see me and think I'm a devil (because what would a normal kid be doing in the marsh in the middle of the night?), and strangle me. He'd be choking me, and I wouldn't be able to talk him out of it. There'd be no use shouting, or crying, or begging him to let me go. I felt like there were worms crawling down my

back, wet, gooey, cold worms. And I felt as if somebody was pulling a noose tight around my neck, so tight I could hardly breathe. I began listening hard. I even think my heart stopped beating, so's it wouldn't make any noise while I was listening. I heard a splash behind the bushes. Something fell into the water. Maybe somebody'd been tossed out of the boat. Maybe Gunka'd brought somebody out to the marsh and drowned him. It'd be my turn next. I couldn't just sit there. I took a couple of steps towards the tent. My feet felt like they were made of lead. Then I bumped into somebody. Somebody huge clutched my shoulders. I kicked, jerked and fell. That somebody fell on top of me, scratched my face and...

Robinson Cuckoorusoe's story was cut short here, because Pavlik gasped and interrupted him. The reader will not understand what they spoke about until he learns what happened to Pavlik Zavgorodny that day and night.

Chapter 9

PAVLIK ZAVGORODNY RECOUNTS WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM THAT DAY AND NIGAT

Well, I left Robinson Cuckoorusoe on the desert island and headed back home, but before I'd gone half the way I was in the middle of an adventure. There was an awful lot of water in the boat, but there were no waves splashing over the sides. What could it be? I looked hard, and there it was: a hole in the bottom, three fingers wide, with the water pouring in and even bubbling up. This hole had already given us a lot of trouble. We'd filled it with a birch plug and caulked it, but now the plug had come out. It was lost, and the water was pouring in again just like in those problems we did in arithmetic: "Water pours in through one pipe and

pours out through another." The only difference was that nothing was pouring out. There was only one answer to this kind of a problem, and it wasn't a very good one. In another couple of minutes the water'd reach the top and... I'd never make it back to the village without a boat. It was too far. If I tried to swim my arms and legs would get all tangled up in the water lilies' stalks, and all that'd be left of me would be bubbles on the water. Everything inside of me got icy-cold and began to shiver, but on the outside I broke out in a sweat. "Is this the end?" I said to myself. "I'm still so young. I want to live! I want to grow up and be a pilot. And marry Grebeniuchka (if I don't meet any one else I like)." No. I just couldn't die. I had to pull up at some island immediately, plug up the hole and bail out the water. I paddled fast. There were reeds all around me, blocking my view. The water kept pouring in. It was nearly up to my knees. I kept looking this way and that, trying to see some land. At last I noticed a little island and headed towards it. And just in the nick of time, because by then there was only a little bit of the rim showing above the water. It looked like a wooden frame floating along with water in the middle and water all around, and the water-level both inside and out was the same. I was standing in the middle of the frame like a portrait. A few more minutes, though, and no one would have ever seen that portrait again. I jumped out and tried to pull the boat up to bail out the water, but it wouldn't budge. I pulled, but it wouldn't budge. You'd think it was nailed to the bottom. What was I to do? Wouldn't I ever pull it out? Besides, I was now on a desert island, too. Help! I didn't want to be shipwrecked. I wanted to go back home. I didn't have any provisions, or anything. Just naked me under my clothes. I didn't even have my penknife. I wasn't prepared for this. Cuckoorusoe was. He had all he needed: a sack full of food, a flashlight and even a gun, to say nothing of fishing rods and worms. Besides, he'd chosen a peach of an

island. As for this place I was on, why, it was about the size of a dried cake of cow dung. Both in size and in quality. There wasn't a single bush or tree on it, and not any land to speak of. No place to sit down even. Nothing but stinky mud. If anybody wanted to live on it, he'd have to stand on one foot at a time with the other curled up like a heron. And I was no heron. I was a twelve-year-old boy going on thirteen. I couldn't live on that island. I'd die there. Help! Somebody! Where are you?

As if anyone could hear me! There was nothing but croaking frogs all around. No one'd rescue me if I didn't rescue myself, no doubt about it. So that's what I'd have to do.

I squished around in the mud by the boat, sniffling and not knowing what to do. I tried bailing the water out, but it was no use, because it kept on pouring in through the hole. It was the same as trying to bail the water out of the river. What if I plugged up the hole again? What a brainstorm! I pulled up a clump of grass, which was the only thing that grew on the island, felt around for the hole and plugged it up. Then I started bailing out the water. Oho! I was making progress! Slowly but surely, bit by bit, the sides of the boat began to appear. Now I could try pulling it up again.

I grunted and pulled. The boat was inching up onto the bank. There! Now I'd tip it over to pour out the water I hadn't been able to bail out. *Heave-ho*! It was a tough job. I saw stars. Once again now! Once again now! *Heave-ho*! Whew! At last! Good for me! Wasn't I smart? I was so proud of myself I was nearly purring. Now I'd have to plug up the hole real good to make sure it wouldn't come unplugged again.

I waved goodbye to the island that would remain uninhabited for ever more and sailed off, reaching the village without any further trouble. I did keep an eye on the hole, though, to make sure I hadn't sprung another leak. Some water was oozing in, but not enough to be dangerous.

I began fixing the boat as soon as I got back. It took me till dinnertime, but I caulked all the cracks and tarred them. Things weren't too bad while I was busy working. But when I got through, went outside after dinner and looked up at the high poplar by the gate where Java and I used to meet every morning, not to part until evening, I became so depressed I could've cried. The street, the village, the whole world seemed empty and lifeless, just like a desert island. There were people all around me, but they might as well not have been there, because my best friend was not among them. I slouched around the village feeling miserable. Every spot, every bush and tree reminded me of Java. This was where we played tip-cat. We hid in those bushes when we'd decided to catch some goldfinches. We'd tried to see who was best at climbing that tree. Remember, Java? The branch I was standing on broke, and I hung upside-down and then fell on my head. It felt as if my head had gone right into my shoulders. That fall knocked the breath out of me. Ha-ha. But you didn't laugh, you applied artificial respiration. You think I'll ever forget that?

And I can't even look at the Great Wall of China. Our common enemy, Knysh, whom I'll now have to tail and unmask all by myself, lives beyond the wall. How awful it is to have to do all those interesting things by myself!

And there's the willow by the river. D'you think any of the boys'll ever dive from the top branch? Not on your life they won't! Your record'll remain unchallenged forever. And you could've set so many other records!

I wandered about till dark, visiting all the places we'd been together. At last I went home and got into bed. I lay there, but couldn't sleep. I kept thinking. It was as dark as pitch outside. There were clouds in the sky that blocked out the stars.

What was my friend Cuckoorusoe doing on the desert island right now? Was he asleep? There was no one else on

his island. His fire had died down. And weird, spooky shadows were probably closing in on him. He was all alone. He had no one to talk to. All he could do was listen to his heart pounding. What if something had happened to him? What if he was shouting, calling for help, and not a soul in the whole wide world could hear him? There'd only be the goggle-eyed frogs croaking away and the ducks quacking in the reeds. The echo of his shouts roll on through the marsh and never reach human ears, for it'd die away in the reeds. Who'd ever come to his rescue?

I lay there tensely, holding my breath, and suddenly I heard a faint, far-away, mournful: "A-a-a-ahh!" It was either a train whistle or a human voice, but it was too faint to tell. For some reason, though, I felt that my friend was in trouble. No one in the world knew where he was. No one except me. And no one would ever know where to find him. No one except me. And no one could rescue him. No one except me. I couldn't go to sleep when my friend was in trouble. I just couldn't.

"I'll go out and sleep in the barn, Ma. It's stuffy in here," I said.

"All right," my mother said sleepily. "But take your blanket along and see that you're covered."

I took my blanket, went outside and was immediately

plunged into dense, sticky darkness. I felt my way along, as if I were blind. I didn't want the gate to creak, so I made my way into the garden and climbed over the fence. I walked down the village street as if I were in the middle of a forest: everything was pitch-dark and still. Ahead a small light flickered. It was the street light outside the village Soviet. The wind made the lamp sway, and the round spot of light it cast moved back and forth across the ground like a swing. Farther on everything was pitch-black again. I tripped twice and nearly fell. There was the river. It was a little lighter there. The water gleamed dully. I got into the boat, placed my blanket carefully in the bow to keep it from getting wet (I don't know why I took it along) and pushed off. My hands and arms seemed to belong to someone else. I didn't feel them paddling, they were doing it mechanically. The rest of my body also seemed to be made of wood. It was as if I was imagining all this, as if it wasn't for real.

No, I couldn't get lost. I had to find him. Here was the first patch of water and the lane. Now the second patch. Turn right. There was the muddy little island on which I'd nearly been stranded for good. I was on the right track, retracing our route. The moon appeared from behind the clouds. Now the marsh and my spirits as well became lighter and brighter. It was just a little way more to go. I was getting close. One more lane and a turn. It was like coming out on a huge square from a narrow little street. The large stretch of water reflected the curved moon and the silvery clouds. The green, looming island suddenly seemed like a huge fairy-tale mountain set in the middle of a great sea. It was still very far to that mountain, it was on the horizon, and I was like a tiny little bug. It even seemed to me that I could see magic cities, palaces, church spires, and towers on the slopes (actually, they were willow branches), and riders galloping along the winding mountain roads. I thought I could hear the sound of the horses' hooves (actually it was the stillness ringing in my ears).

That's the strange kind of things people sometimes imagine.

And that's why what I suddenly saw for real seemed so weird and unreal. What I saw was a huge somebody standing up in a boat close to the bank. He looked like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputs. I started. Who was it? Robinson Cuckoorusoe? But he didn't have a boat! A fisherman? But the fishermen of our village never go this far into the marsh, especially at night. There was plenty of fish near the village.

Was it a criminal? A pirate? My heart sank. Meanwhile, the boat had disappeared in the reeds. All I wanted to do was to turn around and get out of there as fast as I could but I forced myself to stay put. Cuckoorusoe, my best friend, was all alone on the island. I was coming to his rescue. Maybe at this very moment he needed me badly. After all, I had a boat. If the stranger I'd just seen was really dangerous and wanted to murder Java I'd rescue him and we'd escape in our boat. I had to hurry! I put my weight on the oar, nosed the boat into the bank, pulled up, got out and began creeping towards the clearing. Cuckoorusoe was probably in the tent. He was probably sleeping unsuspectingly, because I couldn't hear a sound. It was too dangerous to call to him, since that would alert the stranger.

How dark it was! How dense the underbrush was! I couldn't see a thing. Suddenly I heard a loud splash beyond the reeds, in the place where the stranger probably was. Something fell into the water. My heart skipped a beat. What was it? What if– What if he'd drowned Java? I broke out in a cold sweat. A minute passed... And another. I stood there in the darkness with my hands stretched out in front of me and couldn't move a muscle. Suddenly... Suddenly someone bumped into my outstretched hands. Somebody as big as a bear. My hands gripped at him convulsively. The next moment I felt a terrible blow to my legs and pitched forward onto him instead of falling backward (that's one of the grips in *sambo* fighting, Java and I know it). I yelped and began thrashing about, trying to break free. I scratched something soft. It felt like a face. Then I pulled

free, jumped up and dashed off. I sped through the thicket, breaking branches, stumbling and crashing into tree trunks, but I didn't feel the pain of those scratches and blows. I took a flying jump into the boat, snatched up the oar and shoved off.

I never paddled so frantically in my life. The boat sped off like a rocket. Every few minutes I'd look back to see whether whoever it was was after me. He wasn't. No one was. I didn't come to my senses till I nosed into the bank by the village. I couldn't stop shivering, but no matter how scared and tired I was, I ran most of the way home, for I couldn't feel safe till I was back in my own yard again. The wet end of the blanket (I'd gotten it wet after all) slapped against my back, whipping me on. I fell into the hay outside the barn like a ton of bricks and lay there for a long time as if I were unconscious and coming to my senses slowly. Scenes of what had just happened flashed through my mind. What actually had happened? Who had it been? Had Robinson Cuckoorusoe perished? What was I to do? Should I waken my father, tell him what had happened, get up a rescue party and set out? But what if Cuckoorusoe hadn't perished? What if my encounter with the stranger (by then I was beginning to feel rather proud of it) had awakened Java and given him a chance to escape? But I couldn't be sure. Then again if I showed up with a rescue party Cuckoorusoe's secret would be revealed, and I'd be the traitor. Oh, no! I'd never betray my friend. I'd never choose treachery. Never, no matter what. But what was I to do? What could I do? I tossed about for a long time, but could find no solution. At last I was overcome by sleep and weariness.

My night's adventure seemed so impossible that when I awoke the next morning I began to wonder whether it hadn't all been a dream. Then my mother came over to me and said, "How'd you sleep out in the yard, Pavlik? Oh, look! The blanket's wet. Did it rain last night?"

"Uh, I... I... wanted a drink. I brought the mug over here and spilled it by accident."

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Luckily, ma had to milk the cow and didn't ask me any more questions.

I recalled every detail of what had happened that night, but now, for some reason or other, it didn't seem as terrible as it had. Perhaps this was because it was such a bright, sunny morning and, as you know, all the fears of the night vanish in daylight. At night everything seems scary, because it's dark and quiet, and everyone's asleep. But in the morning the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, the women rattle their pails by the well and there are people everywhere. I was full of pep and energy. Onward to the island! To find out whether Cuckoorusoe was alive.

I washed quickly and dashed into the cowshed. My mother was still milking the cow. "Ma! Give me some milk, please. I'm in a hurry. I've got to run."

"Where to? You haven't had your breakfast."

"I'll have it later. I'm not hungry. I'll just have some milk. We're going fishing."

"Well, take some bread along."

I gulped down a glass of milk, cut a large chunk of bread from the loaf, stuck it under my shirt and raced outside, out through the gate and right into Grandpa Varava, nearly knocking him over. He swayed and muttered:

"What the devil! Just like a jack-rabbit streaking off from a cabbage field."

"'Scuse me! Good morning."

"It is. Where are you going in such a hurry, knocking people over on the way?"

"To the river. Fishing with the boys."

"Ah, so you've overslept?" he said. His voice sounded more friendly, but it was reproachful all the same.

"Yep. I'll be going. 'Scuse me!" But to myself I said, "You don't know where I'm going. If you did, you'd sing another song."

Chapter 10

A REAL PIRATE

The closer I got to the island the more excited I became and the harder my heart pounded. Was he alive or not? Was he alive or not?

And suddenly... There was Robinson Cuckoorusoe, standing on the bank, looking out of the bushes, hale and hearty and grinning at me! His nose was peeling. There was a long scratch down his right cheek, but what was a scratched cheek to a hero like Cuckoorusoe? A piffle! When I pulled up I wanted to jump out and hug him, but I held back. I just thumped him on the back and said, "Well? How was it?"

"You won't believe me anyway. You'll say I'm a liar."

"Come on."

"Pirates attacked me last night, that's what. I fought them off. I never fought like that before in my whole life! I thought I'd get killed. Look," he said and jabbed a finger at his scratched cheek. Then he pulled up his shirt and showed me a black-and-blue mark on his side.

"Then what? Then what happened?"

"Don't rush me. I'll start from the beginning." And Cuckoorusoe told me the above story.

When he got to the part about his fight with the stranger who'd tripped him and then fallen on top of him and began scratching him, something began to tickle my insides, then it rose to my throat and burst out of my mouth as a giggle.

"What's the matter?" Cuckoorusoe sounded hurt. "Sure, go on and laugh. I'd like to have seen you here last night."

"Tell me about the fight again."

He repeated his story. I shook my head and said,

"It was me."

He stared at me goggle-eyed, then said, "Like hell it was!"

"It was me," I repeated. "Honest. Look." I pulled up my trouser leg and showed him the huge bruise near my knee. "You did it." And I told him of my adventures that night. He stood there blinking hard.

"You mean– it was– it was– You mean we were fighting each other? I thought I was fighting somebody real big."

"Me, too. I thought it was a giant."

We both burst out laughing.

"What about the stranger? Didn't he get out of his boat?"

"No."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. He just disappeared. I was so scared I climbed a tree and sat on a branch like a monkey till it got light. I didn't even shut my eyes. When it got light I climbed down and had a nap."

"Why d'you think he came here?"

"How do I know? It wasn't to visit me, that's for sure."

"Did you hear something fall into the water with a big splash?"

"Sure. It made my blood freeze."

"Maybe it was a murderer drowning his victim. Or a thief hiding his loot. Hm?"

"Who knows? Let's go have a look."

"Didn't you have a look yet?"

"No. I was just getting ready to when you got here. Anyway, the reeds are too thick there, so you won't really see anything from the bank. We've got to paddle over."

We got into our boat and rounded the bend, approaching the place where we'd both heard the splash. Though it was now morning and the sun was shining, our hearts were pounding, for we didn't know what awaited us there. What if it was really

something terrible! I paddled and Cuckoorusoe sat in the bow, peering ahead. The boat was slowly moving past the reeds of the island. I still couldn't see anything when he suddenly shouted.

"Now I know!"

I paddled harder. A moment later I, too, saw the white floats of a large fishing net stretching off across the dark water like a huge dotted line.

"That's what it was! That's what made the splash! You're right, Cuckoorusoe. It was a pirate. A real, genuine pirate. A poacher."

We knew only too well what poachers were. A poacher was not a hunter or a fisherman. He was a thief. We hated poachers. Fishing with a big net was poaching. It wasn't sport, it was criminal destruction of the fish.

"How d'you like that? Who d'you think it could be?" Cuckoorusoe asked.

"I don't know. D'you think it's somebody from the village?"

"Whoever he is, he's a poacher. What're we going to do about it?"

"I don't know. Go back to the village for help? We won't make it in time. He'll be back soon. If he cast the net last night and didn't come for his catch at dawn, it means he'll be here any minute. No doubt about it. Maybe he's real close now. Maybe he's right behind those reeds."

"You mean we're going to stand here and watch him?"

"What can we do? Tell him to go away? He'll drown us like

a couple of kittens. Nobody'll ever find out. Nobody'll hear us or see us."

"You sure are a scaredy-cat!"

"Think you're so brave? Sitting up in a tree all night like a roosting hen."

"If you go on yakking like that he'll be here before we know it, and we won't have time to do anything."

"What d'you want to have time to do?"

"What? Well, we can let the fish go, so there won't be any left in the net when he gets here."

"What if he catches us at it?"

"You sound just like Karafolka! If we waste any more time he'll be sure to catch us, and– You give me a pain!" Cuckoorusoe leaned over the side, grabbed hold of a corner of the net and began pulling it up into the boat. A moment later a carp as big and round as a plate began thrashing in the boat, its scales sparkling in the sun. "Come on, help me!"

I pitched in. I'd never seen so many fish, or fish that were that big. We picked them out of the net and tossed them as far from the boat as we could, to make sure they wouldn't get caught in the net again. We worked fast and kept glancing over our shoulders, expecting whoever it was to come into sight at any moment. Our fingers bled from the fishes' sharp fins and gills, but there was no time to stop.

We could hardly pull one of the pikes over the side. What a pike that was, as big as a calf and over a metre long! We just gazed at it in awe. After all, we were fishermen. We'd never seen such a pike in our lives. Perhaps we never would again. What a shame. Then, straining

hard, we rolled it over the side. It slapped against the water so hard it nearly turned us over. We were having more and more trouble getting the fish out of the net, because we were tired and it was hard work. Still and all, we'd only gotten about half of them out.

"You know what?" I said. "Let's cut the net! To hell with it! Its a poacher's net anyway. Why feel sorry for it?"

"Right," said Cuckoorusoe and got what used to be my penknife from his pocket. It was as sharp as a razor. Things went much faster after that. Finally, the last fish was gone. We dropped the net back into the water.

"That's it! Let's go," said Cuckoorusoe.

We really were lucky. Darn lucky. We'd just pulled the boat up onto the bank and hid it in the reeds when we heard voices coming from the spot where we'd been a few minutes before. At first we couldn't hear what they were saying. All we could make out was that one was a man's voice and the other was a woman's. We crept through the reeds and waded in to listen.

"What the hell... It's empty..." the man was saying.

"It's because you cast it wrong, you fool!" the woman screeched.

"I did it like I always do. It's the same spot. There was always so much fish here."

"Look! The net's torn!"

"What? Yes! And here, too. And here. What happened?"

"You tore it, you idiot! How many times did I say be careful? This net cost us a fortune! It's goodbye to all that money now. Oh, why'd I ever marry you? Look at it! O Lord!"

"It's not my fault. I swear it isn't. I didn't tear it. It wasn't torn last night. May I drop dead on the spot if I'm lying!"

We were as still as mice.

"It's the Knyshes!" Cuckoorusoe whispered in my ear.

I nodded silently. I'd recognized their voices from the start, and when Knysh had said: "May I drop dead on the spot!" it had settled it.

Chapter 11

UNEXPECTED VISITORS: IGOR, VALYA AND THE REST

I don't know what border guards feel like when they're lying in ambush and listening in on the conversation of spies, but I think that what we felt then must've been something very much like it. Our only thoughts were of not missing a word or revealing our presence.

Knysh's wife was speaking. She was as mad as a hornet. "Well! What'll I tell them? They'll be here tomorrow night. And that's some trip, driving up by motorcycle all the way from Kiev. And there won't be any money. You'll stay up all night till you've mended this net. It's got to be in the water by tomorrow night! I'll talk them into staying over. I'll have to get them a bottle of vodka. Oh, God! Just you wait! I'll make you pay for that bottle! It'll be a bottle of my tears! You'll be sorry, you murderer!"

Knysh just sighed.

"Come on, let's go. You're as slow as molasses!"

Those were the last words we heard. We couldn't see them from behind the reeds and so kept on listening for a few minutes more till we became convinced they were gone.

"Now we know what it's all about!" Cuckoorusoe said. "And you said he was a spy."

"So what? Maybe he is. He's a rat, that's what. A louse."

"Now we know. Remember them haggling in the park? And those two guys on the motorcycle? And all the rest of it? What a rat! He'll catch all the fish in the river if we don't stop him."

"What'll we do? He'll be back tomorrow night. If–" He

stopped short at the sound of loud singing. It was coming from the stretch of water just ahead:

May there always be sunshine
May there always be blue skies,
May there always be Mama,
May there always be me.

The voices belonged to boys and girls. It seemed as if a happy group of Young Pioneers was marching straight over the water and the marsh, and through the reeds. We looked at each other in wonder. What could it be? Then we dashed up the bank to where we could see the water. Still, we saw nothing. The reeds were too high.

"Let's climb the tree!" Cuckoorusoe shouted.

We scrambled up the old willow, the one under which we'd built the tent, as it was the tallest tree on the island. Then we saw them. Rowboats were coming out of the lane, sailing into the stretch of clear water like swans. Young Pioneers wearing white T-shirts and white caps were in the boats. A tall, shirtless young man wearing white slacks was standing in the first boat. He was probably the Pioneer leader. His powerful muscles bulged all over his tanned chest and arms. He looked like somebody on a physical fitness poster. When the song ended he called out,

"I suggest we stop off at this island. What d'you say, Pilot?" He turned to the small, serious-looking boy who sat in the stern.

"Right!" the boy replied gravely.

For some reason or other everyone laughed.

"Then head for the island," the leader said just as gravely.

"Right!" the boy repeated.

And again everyone laughed, but the boy paid no attention

to the laughter. The boats began pulling up at the island, transforming it into a summer camp with kids racing around, laughing and shouting. Some were playing ball, some were splashing around in the water, some were running around with butterfly nets. We sat there in the tree, not knowing what to do. Should we let them know we were there, or not? We didn't have to make up our minds after all, because a tall, leggy girl spotted our tent and shouted,

"Hey! Look! Somebody lives here!"

Everybody came running. Then the young man came up. A tanned boy who had a camera on a strap over his shoulder darted into the tent and came out a moment later carrying the flashlight I'd brought Java as a present from Kiev.

"It's a flashlight," he announced. "A mechanical one. It's got a magneto. It won't work unless you pump it." And he began pumping it, making a whirring sound. Cuckoorusoe fidgeted on the branch beside me. Then the tall, leggy girl darted into the tent. When she came out she was holding Java's gun.

"Look! It's a real shotgun."

"Careful! What if it's loaded? It might go off!" one of the girls shrieked.

"Put that back!" Cuckoorusoe shouted.

They all raised their heads. There was no sense in us hiding anymore. We got down and were immediately surrounded.

"Who're you?"

"What're you doing here?"

"Is this your tent?"

"Is this your gun?"

"Are you hunters?"

"D'you live here?"

I looked at Cuckoorusoe, not knowing what to say. He frowned and said nothing.

"They're probably just fishing here."

"Maybe they ran away from home."

"Maybe they're playing Indians, like the boys in Seton Thompson's *Little Savages*."

"Or Robinson Crusoe. Huh?"

I looked at Cuckoorusoe. My friend turned beet-red. Then he said,

"We're not playing anything. We're on an important assignment. We're going to trap a poacher."

"You are?"

"Boy!"

"Who told you to?"

"Nobody told us to," Cuckoorusoe said haughtily. "We tracked him down, and now we're lying in wait."

Then, seeing their amazement, he spoke more boldly. "Put that gun back. And the flashlight, too."

The flashlight and the gun were quickly put back in the tent.

"How'd you track him down? And how'll you trap him?" the boy with the camera asked.

"Is that what the gun's for? To trap him?" the tall girl asked.

I decided we had to change the subject. "Are you on a camping trip? Or is this just an outing? Where are you from?"

"Kiev. We're amateur historians. We're searching for places where the partisans fought the nazis," the boy with the camera said.

"Right!" said Pilot.

"We're on our way home now. We've been gone three weeks," the tall girl added.

"Don't exaggerate, Valya. It's only been nineteen days. Today's the twentieth," a girl wearing glasses said.

"Aren't you afraid to get lost in the marsh? D'you know what it's like?"

"We've got a map and a compass, so we can't get lost."

"Listen, Igor," the leader said to the boy with the camera, "if they're really tracking down a poacher we may be in their way. There's so many of us. And we're making so much noise. We don't want to scare him off. Come right out and tell us, boys. We can move to some other island. They're all the same to us."

Cuckoorusoe and I exchanged glances.

"You can stay," Cuckoorusoe said. "He won't be back till tomorrow night. So you won't be in our way till tomorrow night."

"All right, if you're sure we won't," said the leader. Then he turned to the kids and said, "Build a fire and get out the provisions. We'll have breakfast here."

"Right!" the little helmsman said gravely.

A happy shout went up as the kids ran down to the boats.

"You start the campfire, Igor. You're good at that," the leader said.

"Come on, I'll show you where there's lots of brushwood," Cuckoorusoe offered.

The three of us headed inland. We walked along in silence, not knowing what to talk about, as is usually the case when kids first meet. Suddenly Igor made a loud, funny sound. It sounded like a bark or something. But he hadn't opened his mouth (we'd both been looking at him). And then music started playing inside of him. Real music. Jazz. You know, the boop-a-doop kind. We stopped and stared at him. It was weird! He laughed and slung his camera around to the front.

"It's a transistor. I made it myself. But I had to use an old camera case, because I didn't have anything else. Anyway, it's convenient. I can wear it on a strap."

"Gee! How come we didn't guess right away?" I said.

"It's not bad," Cuckoorusoe said condescendingly after he'd

gotten over the first shock. "How much was it?"

"Was what?"

"How much did it cost?"

"Nothing. I made it myself."

"What was that?" Cuckoorusoe made a face and cupped his hand to his ear as if he were deaf.

I giggled.

"I said I made it myself," Igor said seriously.

I giggled again.

"Ah," Cuckoorusoe said with a crooked smile. "I see. What I said was how much does it cost? There were 'Tourist' transistors at the village shop. They cost thirty-five rubles. They were real nice-looking. How much does yours cost?"

"Boy, you sure are funny."

"What're you arguing about, boys?" the leader said, appearing from the bushes.

"Nothing special," Cuckoorusoe replied. But then, looking up at the leader, he suddenly said spitefully, "Are all the Pioneers like that, or just him?"

"What d'you mean?"

"He says he made this transistor all by himself. Maybe that girl built a real car by herself, and Pilot there flew a rocketship?"

"Real cars and rocketships are out, but he really did make his transistor. I know he did. He's a whiz. He's been a member of an amateur radio club for over two years. He's going to be

a great inventor when he grows up." He was speaking very seriously and not joking at all, so we had to believe him. Cuckoorusoe looked deflated. He looked like a rubber balloon when the air's gone out of it. The corners of his mouth drooped, and the taunting look in his eye vanished. I was just as surprised. Somehow, I'd always thought that all those ideal kids who made working models of ships and planes, and fancy plywood shelves, working away with their jigsaws like mad, and all those other things that're usually put on exhibit and which make the teachers and parents ohh and ahh, that all those young geniuses were puny, long-nosed and wore glasses. And that all of them were slightly nutty. That's what I'd always thought. But here was this normal, pug-nosed boy, a well-built and tanned kid, and you could tell he was good at sports. I could just see him racing around the track with a pack of other athletes at some stadium, but I couldn't imagine him stuck away in some quiet laboratory, poking around in the scrambled insides of a transistor.

Cuckoorusoe and I felt very small and insignificant.

The leader looked at us closely and spoke in a seemingly gruff voice, "Come on, kids. Don't waste time. Everybody's hungry. Where's that firewood? Come on!"

This brought us back to our senses, and we began gathering dry branches hastily (even too hastily). Soon we were carrying big armfuls of brushwood back to the clearing. Cuckoorusoe was trying the hardest. He had such a load I was afraid he'd topple over.

"What d'you know!" the girl named Valya shouted when she saw us.

I don't know why Robinson Cuckoorusoe got so red in a face. Maybe it was because he was carrying such a big load. Or maybe it was because of the way she'd shouted: "What

d'you know!" Actually, he'd been looking at Valya quite a lot. Wasn't that stupid? She was just like a scarecrow: tall, skinny, long-legged and goggle-eyed. A hundred times uglier than Grebeniuchka.

Everybody stood around watching Igor build a campfire. He was a city boy, but he sure knew a lot about building a fire. Soon there was a large blaze in the middle of the clearing.

"Whose turn is it to be cook today?" the leader asked.

"Sashko's!" Valya shouted.

"Yes, Sashko's!" all the rest shouted and everyone looked at Pilot.

"Is it?" the leader asked.

"Right!" Sashko replied.

"Today's one lucky day," the leader said and smiled. "Hurray! We want chowder!"

"Chowder!" everyone was now shouting.

"Right," Sashko said and smiled for the very first time.

Now, as we all stood around the campfire, we could see that he was the shortest one of all. Maybe that was why he acted so serious: so's he'd look older. We could also see he was very popular, and if he was kidded it was always good-naturedly.

Sashko began cooking their breakfast. The girls, and Valya, too, all pitched in. They peeled potatoes and cleaned the fish which they had in a net in the water that was tied to one of the boats. All the other kids scattered. We soon came to where Igor was sitting on a stump, whittling. Java and I squatted beside him and poked at the ground idly. Java cleared his throat, frowned (to hide his embarrassment), and said,

"Let's have a look... at the transistor... Huh?"

Igor put down his knife and stick and said, "Sure. Here."

He opened the lid. "This is the tuning, this is the frequency, this is the volume." He touched the three knobs in turn.

Cuckoorusoe bent over the radio. I leaned over it, too, but he elbowed me away and said, "Don't breathe on it. It'll get damp and spoil."

Igor smiled. "That's all right. Breathing won't spoil it."

Cuckoorusoe kept turning the knobs, tuning in on voices in distant lands. "Mmm... It's a valuable thing," he said at last and added, "I bet you've got an A in physics."

"I do," Igor said. He didn't sound at all boastful.

"Did you ever get a D?" Java asked hopefully. "I mean, in deportment, or singing, or shop, or anything? Or are you a straight-A pupil?"

"I am." Igor seemed to be apologizing. "All the members of our expedition are. That was one of the conditions."

Cuckoorusoe heaved a sad sigh. Just then Valya stuck her head out of the bushes. The girls must have finished their work. I could see her, but Igor, who had his back to her, couldn't. Valya crept over to him, and before I had a chance to say anything, shoved him off the stump. It was so unexpected Igor went sprawling into the grass.

"A gentleman always offers a lady his seat," Valya said, sitting down on the stump.

Igor got up and smiled. Java and I exchanged puzzled glances. That was a nice how-d'you-do! A long-legged scarecrow had shoved an athlete who was smart enough to make a radio all by himself just as if he'd been a sack of potatoes. And all he did was smile! If even Grebeniuchka had ever tried to shove me like that I'd've knocked her senseless. But what was happening to Cuckoorusoe?

"Let's have it," Valya said brazenly and held out her hand.

And Cuckoorusoe, like some dumb calf, just handed it over. What a sap! It wasn't her transistor, so why was she ordering everybody around? I was only thinking all this. I didn't say

a word. It wasn't my transistor, and nobody was taking it away from me. Valya tuned it, cocking her head to a side like a bird and staring up into the sky. She tuned in to some awful music and said: "Ohh."

We stared at her.

She kept gazing off at the water as she listened to the music. "That's the adagio from *Swan Lake*;" she said softly.

I made a face. She sure was stuck up, using words nobody knew. But Java looked serious, frowned again and said,

"I'd say it's a duck lake, not a swan lake. There's no swans here, but there's thousands of ducks."

"Oh, no!" Valya shrieked. "I didn't mean this lake. I meant the music. It's a ballet by Tchaikovsky called *Swan Lake*. That's what they're playing."

You'd think somebody'd poured hot water on Cuckoorusoe's head, because all the blood there was in his body rushed to his face. "I know. I know it's a famous ballet. I just said that for laughs."

I turned away. I can't look at a person who's lying to your face. Naturally, Java'd never heard of *Swan Lake* in his life. Anyway, he had no ear for music. He could only sing along when I was singing. All the songs he sang, if he sang them alone, sounded the same. I was mad at Valya for making my friend lie. Besides, who did she think she was anyway?

Valya switched off the radio suddenly, as if she'd guessed my thoughts, and said, "Are you mad at me for coming out here and annoying you? Don't be. I can go away. I just wanted to get to know you."

She said it so simply it made me uncomfortable. Neither Java nor I could think of anything to say. Valya got up, thrust the radio into Cuckoorusoe's hands and ran back to the campfire.

"She sure is funny, isn't she?" he said and sounded embarrassed.

"She's a good guy," Igor replied and then he turned red. "Everybody's friends with her. Why don't you turn it on? Go on. I just changed the batteries."

It seemed to me he'd changed the subject just so we wouldn't be talking about Valya any more. I knew what he felt like, because I would've been uneasy if anybody's been talking about Grebeniuchka.

We sat on the bank by the stump for some time. Then we heard the leader shouting,

"Igor! Boys! Come on! The chowder's ready!"

"Come on," said Igor.

I'd only had a glass of milk that morning and not a bite to eat since then, so the invitation was more than welcome. I'm sure Cuckoorusoe was just as hungry as me, but he suddenly said,

"You go on. We'll stay here. We had a big breakfast just before you came."

I blinked and gaped. Naturally, I said nothing.

"Come on! I bet you never had chowder as good as this."

Still, Cuckoorusoe refused. I swallowed hard and also refused. Then Igor said,

"Just you wait! I'll sic the leader on you!" and ran off.

A moment later Valya came running instead of the leader. She started shouting the moment she got close enough: "What d'you mean? Come on and eat! If you'd've invited me, I'd never've refused. Never! Come on!"

To my great joy Cuckoorusoe, who had flatly refused Igor's invitation, gave in at once and trotted off meekly behind her. For some reason or other I again thought of Grebeniuchka.

I don't know whether it was because I was starved or whether the chowder was really that good, but I don't think I've ever eaten anything as good before. And I'm a good judge of chowder. Everyone in our fishing village knows how to make chowder. I've often made it myself. But this was really something. We all praised Sashko the Pilot. He sat there beside the pot, holding the ladle, frowning as always and waiting to be asked for seconds. Now I knew why they'd all been so happy when they found out it was his turn to be cook. He was their best cook.

When everyone had had his fill the kids sprawled on the grass around the campfire. Someone began to sing softly, and someone else joined in. Then others joined in and the song grew louder and rose over the water until it seemed it was making the reeds bend and sway.

How nice it was to be lying in the grass, looking up at the sky and singing all together. I felt that the whole world could hear us. The leader got up and went down to the boats. When he came back he was carrying an accordion. Now the song sounded still better. When we finished singing it he said,

"Now let's sing 'Campfires Blaze'. You start, Sashko."

"Right," said Sashko, cleared his throat and waited till the first bars of the introduction ended.

I'd never have thought he had such a clear voice. "Right" was all right! Not only was he a famous cook, he was a great singer, too!

We sang for about an hour and a half, or even more. We sang Ukrainian folk songs, revolutionary songs, old and new Komsomol songs and songs from the movies. Then Igor said,

"Let's ask Valya to dance for us."

"She'll start putting on airs and saying she can't, and then everybody'll have to coax her," I said to myself.

"All right," she said simply.

That's when I noticed that Cuckoorusoe had gotten red in the face again and was fidgeting. By the way, while we'd been singing he had kept glancing at Valya, and whenever she'd look his way he'd look away.

The leader played a few bars and announced: "The *Kazachok*, a Ukrainian folk dance."

Valya began to dance. Java was breathing so hard into my ear you'd think he was dancing and was out of breath. But he didn't clap when the music stopped and everyone else clapped. He just frowned and looked away.

Then the girl who wore glasses recited a poem by Mayakovsky. She recited it very well, but she shouted the words so loudly I bet they could hear her back in the village. All in all, it turned into a real show. Then everybody went swimming. Igor did the crawl, Sashko did the breast stroke and Valya was a good swimmer, too (though she swam the way a lot of girls do, with her head out of the water and blowing bubbles). But no one could dive from a high branch. That's when my pal Cuckoorusoe showed them what us boys of Vasukovka were

like. He climbed to the very top of a willow and started swinging back and forth like a monkey. Then he dived. It took him nearly a minute of flying through the air to reach the middle of the stretch of water. Everyone gasped.

"Good for you!" said the leader. "You may be a famous diver some day. You've got to sign up in a diving school. Good for you!"

I was burning with envy and wanted to show them that I was brave, too. I spat on my hands and began climbing the willow, but this wasn't my lucky day. Misfortune lay in wait for me. I caught my shorts on the end of a short branch and ripped them. But what a rip that was! It ran from the very top to the very bottom (including the elastic waistband). I was so ashamed I could've wailed, and I climbed down in disgrace. But nobody laughed at me. On the contrary, they all tried to comfort me.

"Forget it."

"It was an accident."

Each of the girls offered to sew up the rip, but I refused. Imagine me sitting there in the raw while some girl was sewing up my shorts! I'd've shot myself before that ever happened! So I borrowed a needle and thread and crawled into the tent. There, in the semi-darkness, I worked away clumsily, pricking my fingers and swallowing my tears. Suddenly in a corner I noticed a book under some leaves. I leaned over to pick it up. It was a grammar book. I was surprised at first, but then

I recalled that Cuckoorusoe'd brought it along to fool grandfather.

There was a notebook inside the grammar book. I opened it. (I hope my pal forgives me for being nosey.) The heading on the first page read: "The Diary of Robinson Cuckoorusoe". You know all about the first day. There was the page with "Adventures" and "Bad things". I wanted to see what followed, turned the page and– I couldn't believe my eyes. There were pages filled with exercises on verbs, nouns, adjectives and even suffixes. All, like the diary, were written in pencil. That meant they'd all been written on the island. No doubt about it. What a discovery!

Robinson Cuckoorusoe, who was going to live on a desert island for twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days, was studying for his re-examination! What a sly fox he was! He was proud, because he'd always been a leader, and his pride had kept him from telling me he was studying for his re-examination. That's why he'd run off to the island: so's he could study grammar. Now I knew why he named the island the Re-examination Island. Just you wait, Cuckoorusoe! I'll show you!

But what was I going to show him? I'd never breathe a word about the notebook to anyone. I was no enemy of his. I didn't want him to botch things up again and be left back. By no means! I'd never say a word to him about it. Not even half a word. Let him go on thinking I didn't suspect a thing. I pushed the notebook and grammar back under the leaves. He'd never guess I'd seen them.

Discovering them suddenly made me feel as happy as I was when the sun would come out after a rain. I forgot all about my disgrace, quickly sewed up the rest of the rip and rushed out of the tent in a very different mood. Everyone noticed the change in me and began to smile.

"Shorts make the man!" Cuckoorusoe said. "No shorts, no man. But when he's got his shorts on, he can even smile," he said, glanced at Valya and giggled. He was trying to impress her.

Though what he'd said was stupid, I didn't get mad at him. I forgave him.

"Break camp! Break camp!" the leader called out.

Everyone fell to work. It was so unexpected that Cuckoorusoe and I were dumbfounded.

"You mean you're leaving?" I mumbled.

"Yes. We've spent a lot of time here as it is. We hadn't planned on stopping here. We spent the night on a meadow near some haystacks, but early this morning a herd of cows came to graze there. We've a fine bunch of girls, but they're scared of cows. So we had to relocate. We didn't even have time for breakfast. According to our schedule, we should be in Andrushovka before dark. D'you think we'll make it?"

"Sure. You've got good boats," I said.

Cuckoorusoe looked glum. Igor, Valya, Sashko and some other kids crowded around us.

"Goodbye!"

"So long!"

"Good luck!"

We shook everyone's hand in turn. As Valya shook Cuckoorusoe's hand she said:

"Too bad we have to leave now. We'll never know if you caught the poacher. What a shame!" She said this very sincerely. Java turned red again. "You know what?" she said. "Write to us. I'll leave you the address, and you can both write to us. All right?"

"Write to us!"

"Sure!"

"By all means."

"Write to us!"

"Right!" said Sashko the Pilot.

Meanwhile, Valya was jotting down the address on a scrap of paper torn out of a notebook. "Here," she said and handed it to Cuckoorusoe. "Don't lose it."

He put the slip in his pocket.

The Young Pioneers got into the rowboats.

"Let's sing them one last song!" Valya shouted. "You start, Sashko!"

They all began to sing. We stood there on the bank for a long time after they disappeared from view, listening to the song carrying back to us over the marsh.

Then Cuckoorusoe lay down on the grass in the clearing and stared up at the sky.

I, too, lay there, looking up in the sky. The sky is something you can look at for hours. You look at it and think. I don't know what Cuckoorusoe was thinking about, but I wasn't at all surprised when he suddenly said,

"Sure, technology is really something nowadays. I read about a transistor radio mounted in a button, a TV set in a cigarette case, and a camera no bigger than your nail."

"Sure, that's because they use transistors, semi-conductors," I said. Now it was my turn to become red in the face, because I hadn't the slightest idea what either of them was. Neither did Cuckoorusoe. We didn't know a thing. Not a darn thing. But Igor did. You could tell he did. Why, he put a radio together that was all full of transistors, whatever they were.

"Gee, wouldn't it be great to make something that had transistors in it?" Cuckoorusoe said. "Something real special. Something nobody's ever made. Like– Like a cow that's run by

remote control. By radio. We'd have an antenna strung between its horns and a little radio (a transistor, naturally) mounted in its ear. It'd be a pleasure to care for a cow like that. Say you'd be smack in the middle of Grandpa Salivon's watermelon patch (and you know what his watermelons are like!), enjoying a chunk of watermelon. You'd look at your pocket TV and see that your cow Manka'd strayed into the millet field. That darn cow! But you wouldn't have to worry, you wouldn't have to jump up and race over there like mad. You'd just press a button and speak into the mike: 'Man-ka-aa! Get out of there, stupid! Come on!' And Manka'd come galloping out so fast you'd think somebody'd cracked a whip at her. Then you'd sit back and go on enjoying your watermelon. Wouldn't that be something? Huh?"

"Oh, boy!" I was astounded.

"We can't make anything on this island... Not anything with transistors," he said sadly.

"Right! What's so special about this stupid island? Let's go home. Huh? Let's go home, Cuckoorusoe."

He scowled and then glared at me. "Think I'm chicken? Think you can trick me that easy? Well, you can't!"

"But you said..."

"What'd I said? I said I was going to live on a desert island and I am! So let's not talk about it."

There was a strained silence, the kind that comes about when two friends feel one of them is being insincere. Finally, he said,

"Let's think about how we're going to trap Knysh."

I looked at him in surprise. When he'd told those kids about trapping a poacher he'd done the right thing: after all, he couldn't tell them the truth about Re-examination Island. But now... He couldn't be serious.

"You mean you really want to trap him?"

"You mean you want that rat to get away?"

"Are you nuts? He'll drown us before we have a chance to peep."

"He will? What's my gun for? You think you need an army to trap him? A gun's serious business. A gun's a firearm. *Bang*! And that takes care of that. Understand?"

"You mean you're going to shoot him?" I was getting scared.

"You think I'll start out by shooting him? I won't. But– If he– I mean, anybody'll get scared of a gun. And he'll follow my orders."

"Oh. Yes, of course he will. But you know, I'd better be getting back. See? The sun's going down. I'm afraid ma'll be mad as anything."

"I'm not keeping you. Go on," he said grumpily. "But Knysh'll be back here tomorrow and– I don't know. It's up to you. Sure, I can get him myself. If you're scared, I don't mind".

"That's not what I meant. I'll be back tomorrow. Honest."

"Come in the evening so you can sleep over," he said cheerfully. "He'll cast his net tomorrow night and come back for the fish in the morning."

"I don't know about sleeping over, but I'll think of something. I can always sneak out. The main thing's not to fall asleep by accident."

"Put a stick of wood under your head, or some thistles in your shirt."

"Don't worry, I'll manage." With these encouraging words I got into the boat.

Cuckoorusoe's face was glum. I could see he hated to have to

spend another night on the island all by himself. He waded around the boat, checked the sides and said, "This should be caulked. This should be tarred. And this board should be changed." He wanted to add something else, scratched his ear, sniffled and finally said, "You know– Would you bring me a squeaker? Just one. I've got a yen for one, like you do before you're going to die. 'Cause all I've got to eat is fish."

Squeakers were the honeycakes that were sold in the village shop. They were stale, as hard as hard tack, and squeaked when you bit into them. One squeaker could last a whole day. Maybe that's why we liked them so.

"All right. You can depend on me," I said and shoved off.

Chapter 12

WAKING AND SLEEPING

"Where've you been all day with not a thing to eat?" ma said when I got home. "You're nothing but skin and bones."

"But I had chowder! It was great! That boy Sashko can cook better'n real cook," I said before I knew what I was saying and stopped short in time to keep from spilling the whole secret.

Ma noticed this. She looked at me suspiciously. "What Sashko?"

"You know–. The one that lives near the mill. Uncle Mikhailo's son," I lied, saying to myself: "What if she saw him today?" Whew! she said nothing. That meant she hadn't seen him. I was off the hook.

"How was the catch?" she asked.

"Boy! You should've seen them! Some were this big!" I lied without batting an eye. "I wanted to bring you a couple, but they all went into the chowder. Too bad. But I'll bring you some. We're going to the marsh tomorrow evening, and we'll stay out all night. Can I?"

"We'll see. Go chop some firewood. We're all out of wood."

What a relief! It'd gone off smoothly. I ran outside to chop the wood.

I kept close to ma all day, bringing water from the well, sweeping the house. I was so good you could've hung my picture on the wall. But I had to be, because I wanted her to let me go for all of next night. Cuckoorusoe'd be waiting for me. I worked so hard all day long that when I finally fell into bed I went out like a light. I had a crazy dream. It was better than the movies. I'll never forget it as long as I live.

I dreamed that I was on Re-Examination Island. Suddenly I saw a ship sailing into our stretch of water. It was a huge white ocean liner (I'd seen them in the movies). It had three

decks, swimming pools, restaurants and a volleyball court. The smokestack was as big as our house. I stood looking at it and wondering how it could've come down through the narrow lanes in the reeds. But before I was through being amazed the gangway was lowered, and walking down it was– Grebeniuchka. She came over to me and said,

"How do you do? A delegation of German Young Pioneers is visiting the island. You'll be their interpreter." I was too stunned to say anything for a moment, but then replied politely, "With the greatest of pleasure. However, I'd like to remind you that, as you certainly know, my foreign language at school is English, so I don't speak German too fluently. I only know three words in German: der Tisch (the table), der Stuhl (the chair), and der Bleistift (the pencil)."

"That's all right," she said. "It's quite sufficient. Come and greet the visitors."

And there were Igor, Sashko the Pilot and Valya coming down the gangway.

"So that's it! So they're German Pioneers."

I led them to the clearing. Cuckoorusoe was standing outside the tent.

"I'd like you to meet Robinson Vasilyevich Cuckoorusoe, Governor of Re-examination Island," I said in what seemed to me to be fluent German.

"This way, please," Cuckoorusoe said and showed us into the tent.

We entered and found ourselves in a large, bright room where everything was as white as in a hospital. A shiny pot was set on a table in the middle of the room.

"This is a pot," Cuckoorusoe said. "It's run on transistors. It cooks by itself. There are no flames."

Imagine that! Good for him! He'd invented something after all. Something that was run on transistors. And he said you couldn't construct anything on the island.

"Der Stuhl?" Valya suddenly asked.

"Der Bleistift," I replied and wondered at the ease with which I spoke German, because she'd asked: "Hey, did you trap that poacher?" and I had replied: "Sure. Everything's all right. Don't worry."

German was really a swell language: all you had to do was say a couple of words and everyone understood you. Next September I'd surely ask to be transferred to the group studying German. I'd be an honour pupil as easy as anything. Now I knew why all of them, Valya, Igor and Sashko, were all honour pupils.

Just then Grebeniuchka came over to me and said, "A gentleman always offers a lady his seat," and shoved me hard.

"Right!" Sashko the Pilot said.

And I flew off, falling lower and lower into a chasm. *Bang*! I woke up. I was lying on the floor. My shoulder hurt. I'd fallen out of bed in my sleep.

That's the crazy dream I had.

It was late. My parents had gone to work. Breakfast was on the table, with a napkin over my plate and a note beside it. It was a list of chores for me to do. Ma'd probably decided, judging by my behaviour the day before, that I loved housework. I made a face. Being good was hard work.

I pottered around the house till noon and then climbed the Great Wall to our observation post, to see what was going on in the poachers' house.

Not a sound was coming from their yard. Knysh's wife was probably at the market, and Knysh... Knysh was sound asleep under the pear tree. He'd probably been mending his net all night and was now catching up on his sleep. He was lying on his back, shielding his face from the sun with his arm. When I looked at that hairy arm and at the spread fingers of his hand I imagined there were claws on the tips of them instead of nails. How would we ever trap such a big, hairy, scary beast? It was beyond me. I climbed down and walked along the street, look-

ing in at Java's house as I passed by. Grandpa Varava was sitting on a little bench, sharpening his scythe.

"Oh, you haven't the faintest idea where your darling grandson is this very moment," I was thinking. "If you only knew you sure wouldn't be sitting around here. And who can tell what'll happen to him tonight? It's going to be a real military operation. Maybe he'll even have to shoot!"

But Grandpa Varava didn't even raise his head. I sneaked by the open gate so he wouldn't see me (I didn't want him to start questioning me) and continued on my way. I felt uneasy. Trapping a poacher was no joke. This was no kid's prank. It was a real, serious thing. Maybe we'd better tell the grown-ups about it, and then all together we could– But that would be revealing the secret of the desert island and betraying Cuckoorusoe. That would be treason. I'd never be a traitor. Never!

"What're you so glum about again? Did your mother paddle you for getting into trouble again?" someone was saying. I looked up. Ganna Grebeniuk was standing by the well, smiling at me. She had two pails on a yoke over her shoulder. "And why're you alone? Where's your left-back friend? Did you have a fight?"

I should've said something to put her in her place, something like: "It's none of your damn business," but I didn't want to be rude, so I said, "He's visiting his aunt in Peski."

"And poor little you are weeping your eyes out."

Once again I stopped myself from saying what I should have said in such a case: "Wipe your own snot, cry-baby." Instead, I said, "I am not weeping, but I sure do miss him."

This kind of a meek reply probably astonished her, because she looked at me with sympathy and said,

"Then why don't you come around to the playground? We play volleyball every day."

"Ahh..." I said sort of vaguely. All of a sudden I felt that I wanted to tell her about the island and Knysh, the poacher, and the Young Pioneers, and even about the dream I had that

night. It took a lot of will-power not to. If it'd been my secret I'd've probably told her, but Cuckoorusoe would never forgive me if I did. Sometimes it's very hard to be a faithful friend. Then, for some strange reason, I began to wonder whether she could dance the *Kazachok* and decided that she probably could.

While we were talking she'd lowered one of her pails into the well and was now pulling it up, turning the wheel with both hands. I stood watching her for a while and then said to myself, "What the heck! Java can't see me anyway." So I said, "Let me help you."

She didn't say anything. I took hold of the handle and we began turning the wheel together. We turned it so fast the pail kept hitting against the walls, and the water kept splashing out. It was only half-full when we finally raised it. We looked at each other and laughed.

"Let's try again."

I liked us turning the wheel together. We kept jostling each other, and once we even bumped heads. We kept laughing all the time and were sorry when the pails were full at last.

She hooked them onto the yoke, raised it to her shoulder and started off, swaying as she walked. Somewhere inside of me I felt I should be helping her carry the pails, at least as far as her gate, but I didn't have the spunk to. So I just watched her, saying to myself that I'd never go off to live on desert island, not even if someone'd give me a bicycle if I did.

"Oh! Java asked me to get him some squeakers. The shop'll be closing soon," I suddenly recalled, but my next thought was: "I don't have any money! What'll I do? The shop'll close by the time my folks get home."

Grebeniuchka was just opening her gate.

"Ganya!" I shouted, calling her by her first name for the first time in my life.

This was so unexpected she stopped short and spilled some of the water.

I ran up to her, shouting, "Wait, Ganya! Can you lend me nine kopecks? I'll give it back as soon as my ma gets home."

"What for?" She looked at me slyly. "Gigarettes?"

"'Course not! I need the money– I'm going fishing overnight. I've got to buy some hooks before the shop closes. I'll give it back. Honest. Huh?"

"I don't have nine kopecks. I've got a 50-kopeck piece. I'm going to buy a book. A very interesting one. It's called *Kon-Tiki*, and it's about some men who crossed the ocean on a raft."

"I'll bring you the change. It won't take a minute."

"Wait. I'll get the money."

Well, I bought the squeakers, gave Grebeniuchka the change and, when my mother got home, returned the debt. It all went off very nicely. I didn't even have to beg ma for the money. She gave it to me right away and let me go fishing at night. That's what comes of being good and doing everything your mother tells you to! She also gave me a sackful of food. You'd think I was going away for a month.

When the sun went down I started out for the marsh. Before leaving, I picked up a long rope in the shed, the one ma used to tie the calf to a stake in the pasture. "Who knows? We might have to tie him up," I said to myself, sounding braver than I felt.

Chapter 13

"HANDS UP!"

Cuckoorusoe, rod in hand, was standing waist-deep in the water by the bank. He must've been standing there for a long time, because his lips were blue and his teeth were chattering.

"I thought you weren't going to come," he grumbled, but I could see he was happy. He must've been real worried, thinking I wouldn't come. He got out of the water and began doing knee-bends and slapping his sides to warm up. "Well? How're things?" he said. "What's new? How's my grandpa? Did he start a search for me yet?"

"Don't be silly. He was sharpening his scythe when I last saw him. He wasn't even thinking about you."

Cuckoorusoe frowned. I realized he wasn't very pleased at the news. He probably felt as if he'd been on the island for years, and here nobody'd even noticed his absence.

"That's right. That's fine. Soon they'll all forget I was ever born. That'll be just fine," he was saying, trying to sound jolly. But I could hear the misery in his voice. Nobody wants to be forgotten.

I pulled the packet of squeakers from my pocket and handed it to him.

"You brought them! Gee, thanks! Boy, did I ever miss them!" he said and sank his teeth into a honeycake.

"What'd you do? Last evening and all of today?"

"Oh, I went fishing and loafed around."

"Are you still keeping a diary?"

"Nah," he said off-handedly, chewing on the honeycake. "I decided not to. It's just the same as doing homework. That's not what I came out to a desert island for."

I said nothing. I knew what was in the diary.

"How about a game of tip-cat? I haven't played it a long time," he said.

"All right."

The old ducks, the pop-eyed toads, the busy water hens and the other inhabitants of the marsh now witnessed their first game of tip-cat. We played until it got dark and we could no longer even see the bat.

All the while we'd been playing an uneasy feeling had gripped me. It kept getting worse and worse. Naturally, I tried not to let on, but with each passing minute something inside me was making me feel sicker and sicker. I was fully seasoned by the time it got dark and could hardly keep my teeth from chattering.

"We've got to be very quiet now. Don't make a sound. He'll be here soon. He'll cast his net and then..." Cuckoorusoe whispered.

This "then" scared me more than anything else.

To make things still worse, the sky was cloudy and starless.

"Now this is our plan of attack," Cuckoorusoe whispered again. "We approach him in the boat. I'll be in the stern, and I'll have my gun. You'll be in the bow, and you'll have the flashlight. I'll say: 'Hands up!' Then you shine the light on him and shout. 'You come in from the right, Valigura! And you come in from the left, Nikolai Pavlovich!' We want him to think there's a whole lot of us. That's what real border guards do when they trap a spy."

"But what'll we do after we've trapped him?" I asked.

"We'll hand him over to the militia. To Valigura."

"Then you'll leave the island and won't be Robinson Cuckoorusoe any more. Everybody'll know about it."

Why had I said that?

"Oh, no!" Cuckoorusoe whispered. "I'll stay here on the island. You'll take him in."

My knees felt weak. "But– But how– Oh, no," I mumbled.

"It's easy. You'l take him to the precinct and hand him over to Valigura. That's all you have to do."

"But Valigura'll be sound asleep in bed," I wailed. "What'll I do in the middle of the night when it'll be just me and that bandit Knysh? He'll strangle me."

"Don't worry. I'll give you my gun. You can bring it back later."

"Oh, no! D-don't! I'm sc-scared. I'm more scared of the g-gun than of Knysh. What if it goes off by accident and I k-kill him? I'll be t-tried for mur-murder."

It finally dawned on me that Cuckoorusoe had no plan of attack. He'd only figured it out up to the part when he'd say: "Hands up!" Knysh would stand up shakily in the boat with his hands up. But then, it seemed, I'd have to do all the rest. Not on your life! "No! Never! I don't care what you say, I'm not taking Knysh in by myself."

"All right, quit whining. We'll take him in together, as far as the village. Then I'll come back. I didn't know you were chicken."

I felt awfully ashamed Java was so much braver than me. He didn't look a bit scared. I tried to get a grip on myself.

We said nothing for a while. Then we heard a rustling. And a splash. And a lot of little splashes: *plop-plop-plop*. We didn't dare breathe. No doubt about it, Knysh was casting his net. We waited. At last everything became very still. He was gone. We waited a little while longer. All was quiet. There was not a sound to be heard. Knysh was gone.

"Now we get into the boat and lie in ambush," Cuckoorusoe whispered. He loaded his gun and handed me the flashlight.

We got into the boat and rowed slowly along the bank.

"There it is!" I whispered. I was in the bow and was the first to spot the white floats on the water.

We cut into the reeds opposite the floats and camouflaged

the boat. Now we'd have to wait. All through the night, maybe, till Knysh came back for the fish.

"We mustn't fall asleep, not even for a second. If we get all sleepy we'll be half-dead and won't be able to trap him," Java said.

"Right," I said and yawned. I was dying to sleep. I opened my eyes wide, staring into the dark and at the barely visible outline of the reeds, but my eyes kept closing by themselves. I had to keep dipping my hand into the water to rub them open. There's probably nothing harder than trying to keep awake when you're dying to sleep. And the minutes probably never drag as slowly as when you're sitting in the dark, fighting off sleep, waiting for something to happen.

"Keep awake. We don't want to miss him," Cuckoorusoe hissed.

I couldn't see him in the dark. If only he knew how I wished we'd miss Knysh! But there was no hope that we might, not with Java around. Wasn't he scared at all?

My mind cooked up all sorts of terrible scenes: Knysh, his teeth bared, was cracking me over the head with his oar. I was falling overboard, gulping water, gasping for air as the water-weeds entangled me and– Yes, I really was gasping. Why, oh why had we ever got mixed up in this? Who knows how it would all end? What if the end would really be like I'd just imagined it? We'd be lucky if they ever found our bodies. Then we'd have a big funeral. There'd be weepy music and speeches. All the kids from school would be there and everyone else from the village, too. And they'd all be crying. And Grebeniuchka, wiping her tear-stained cheeks, would sob: "I saw him the day before he drowned. He was so nice, so polite. He helped me fill my pails at the well. And he called me Ganya. I lent him nine kopecks, but if I'd've known what'd happen I'd've given him my fifty kopecks for keeps. He was such a fine boy!"

This made me feel so sorry for myself that a lump rose to my

throat. Cuckoorusoe, who knew nothing of this, hissed at me again,

"Don't sleep!"

"I'm not! I'm not!" I whispered in a tragic voice.

The hours dragged on.

Either my eyes had become accustomed to the dark or it was really getting lighter, but whatever it was, I could now make out the reeds, the glittering water and the billowing clouds. Maybe it was getting light? I felt like we'd been sitting there for years. All of a sudden I felt as if someone'd poked me in the chest. A boat appeared from the darkness. It was coming straight at us: closer, and closer, and closer. I could see the monster Knysh in it.

My heart hung by a tiny thread which was about to break at any moment. I gripped the sides of the boat.

At that very moment Cuckoorusoe shot the bolt of his gun and shouted in a deep voice: "Hands up!"

I forgot all about the flashlight. I forgot what I was supposed to shout and shrieked in a terrified voice: "Help! This way! Over there!" And I froze, terrified by the sound of my own voice.

"Hands up! Hands up!" Cuckoorusoe shouted in a voice that wasn't as deep as it was the first time. Now he, too, was silent. He didn't know what to do.

For a long moment everything was very still. Then...

"Eh?" the monster said, as if it hadn't understood us.

Then something fell with a thud into our boat–Java'd dropped his gun. All this was so unexpected that all I could do was gape. I finally remembered the flashlight and began pumping it like mad.

Standing in the other boat was– Grandpa Varava.

"Is that you, Grandpa?" Cuckoorusoe finally managed to squeak.

"'Course it's me," said Grandpa Varava, coming closer. "Don't you recognize me? What's going on here? You decide to become a robber? Holding up people at gunpoint? You figure since you didn't make out at school you'd try your hand at highway robbery?"

"No, Grandpa!" Cuckoorusoe shouted. "How can you say that? We're no robbers! Look! Give him some light, Pavlik."

I began pumping the flashlight again. I was ready to pump it all night. That's how happy I was to see Grandpa Varava. I was ready to throw myself into his arms. My terror was gone. With him here I wasn't afraid of anything. I shined the light on the floats.

"So that's it," he said. "So you're not robbers, you're poachers. You think it makes me any happier? It's the same pair of pants put on backwards."

"No, Grandpa! It's not our net. It's Knysh's. We trailed him. And we're going to catch him red-handed."

"You don't say? Sure it's Knysh?"

"We saw him!" I said excitedly. "We saw him cast it. And he came for his catch once. Him and his wife."

"That's a different story. Good for you, boys. But you're waiting at the wrong time. He won't come till dawn, not till about three or four o'clock. And it's not even midnight yet."

"What?" I couldn't believe it.

"Did you think the night's over? You been waiting here long?"

"Since sunset."

"Poor you. And trying to keep awake all this time. Well, you can get some sleep now. I'll stand watch for you. I'll wake you up in time."

"I'm not a bit sleepy," Cuckoorusoe said.

"Me, neither," I had to say.

"Do as you like," Grandpa Varava said and moved his canoe up alongside of us.

Nobody said anything. I knew Java was afraid his grandfather might start questioning him, but the old man was busy camouflaging his canoe. In such cases it's always best to be the first to start asking questions, and Java finally said,

"How come you're here, Grandpa?"

"I decided to drown myself. What with the misery of it all. Having such a good-for-nothing grandson, that is."

"I'm not joking."

"Neither am I."

"Come on, tell me."

"You lied to me, so why should I tell you the truth?"

"Why, I–" Java said and stopped. What could he say?

"Eh-heh." The old man heaved a sad sigh. "Where could I be going except to look for dopey you? I went to clean my gun today. The season opens on Sunday. And I decided to clean yours, too. Even though you're a no-good pupil, I was sorry for you. The least I can do is see that you grow up to be

a good hunter. Well, your gun was gone. I looked high and low, but couldn't find it. Did somebody steal it? Then I saw that nearly half the cartridges were gone. You never thought I counted them, did you? That made things a bit clearer. Specially since the padded jacket you wear when we go hunting was gone, too. Still, I decided to double-check and went all the way to your Aunt Ganna's in Peski. You've no pity on my old legs: seven kilometres there and seven back! Well, you weren't there. I didn't say anything to her so's she wouldn't worry. 'I bet the kid's gone off into the marsh,' I said to myself. I did too, when I was a kid. It was getting dark by the time I got back home. I should've waited till morning to go looking for you, but I was getting worried. This marsh is no playground. There's many a nazi found himself a watery grave here. So I decided to come out now and look for you instead of waiting. And here I am."

We expected the old man to scold us, and even to box our ears as he'd sometimes done before, but we never expected him to speak to us as if we were grown up. Neither of us said a word.

"I don't want to think I'll die before I see you amount to something," Grandpa Varava said sadly.

"Don't talk like that, Grandpa. You won't die!" Java croaked.

"You think your grandpa will live forever? Why, I've turned eighty! Before you know it they'll be laying me to rest. It won't be long now."

"Why, I might even die before you do. Remember that boil I had on my leg? And I was burning up? So–"

"Ah, my boy, there's a law that says the young *may* die, but the old *must* die. That's the way the world goes round. And don't you try to get ahead in this. Try to get ahead in something else."

We were silent again. Java was very upset. So was I. I'd never heard Grandpa Varava talk like this before. He was for-

ever grumbling, scolding, even cuffing us at times, but now... I'd rather he boxed our ears.

"Don't tell ma, Grandpa," "Java pleaded. "Please. Huh?"

"What's there to tell? I don't want to get her still more worried about you."

"I've been studying grammar. Honest. And I'll pass my exam."

"We'll see. Try to get some sleep, both of you. Otherwise you'll be like two worms in a dead faint when I'll need you most. It's a long wait."

"What about you? You get some sleep. We'll stand watch."

"No back talk!" the old man grumbled. His familiar grumbling was like old times and cheered us up.

Java didn't argue any more. He curled up in the bottom of the boat. Naturally, I did, too. A moment later I was sound asleep. I felt I'd just closed my eyes when someone touched my shoulder. I felt Grandpa Varava's rough finger pressed to my lips. That meant I wasn't to make a sound.

It was daybreak. In the first light of dawn I saw Cuckoorusoe sitting up in the stern, blinking sleepily. I rose slowly and looked at the stretch of water ahead. Knysh was sitting in his boat, picking fish out of the net. He was alone. Large pike, carp and breams were plopping into his boat. It was a fine catch.

"Come on, boys," Grandpa Varava whispered and coughed loudly several times.

Knysh started, cringed and drew his head into his shoulders. Grandpa Varava was slowly steering his canoe out of the reeds. We followed close behind.

"How're you doing, my good man?" Grandpa Varava said calmly as he sailed up to Knysh.

"Uh... He-hello," Knysh said and smiled foolishly. "You sure did scare me. I didn't know what to think. Heh-heh."

"You fishing?" Grandpa Varava asked in the same calm tone of voice.

"Yep," Knysh said and squirmed. "Look at them! What a catch! I never expected it. I was just thinking about you. I was just saying to myself that I'd stop by and give you some of the biggest ones. I'm glad to see you. Here, take whichever ones you like. Here, take this pike, and these carp, and this bream. Where do I put them?" Knysh picked up the biggest pike and bent over to toss it into Grandpa Varava's canoe, but the old man pushed his hand aside, and the pike slipped into the water with a splash.

"Come on. You're coming with us," Grandpa Varava said sternly.

"What? Where to? You sure like to joke. Heh-heh," Knysh said, grinning again.

"I said come on!"

"What's the matter? What for? You're fooling. Wait. Want me to give you half of my catch? And I'll stand you to some drinks. And I'll buy the boys some candy."

"Eh, man, I don't know why you've been put in this world. All you do is poison the air and use up food for nothing. Come on."

We were very still as we sat in our boat, watching them. How come Grandpa Varava wasn't afraid of him? He was unarmed, and Knysh was twice as big as he! If Knysh just shoved him lightly he'd send him flying, and that'd surely be the end of Grandpa Varava. He'd disappear like a bubble on the water. But Knysh was acting like a whipped dog. It even seemed like he had a tail and that it was tucked between his legs. And his eyes were like the eyes of a whipped dog. He was hastily pulling in the net, glancing at Grandpa Varava quiltily. But Grandpa Varava stood his ground. When Knysh finally pulled in the net he said sternly, "You go first."

Knysh led the way obediently. Grandpa Varava followed, and we brought up the rear. As soon as we moved away from

the island Knysh began to plead: "Lemme go! Please!" His voice was just like a cry-baby's. I couldn't believe it was coming from a huge man like him and stared at him in wonder. What a bandit, what a monster, indeed! I'd been so scared of him I'd nearly died of fright.

Knysh kept pleading all the way back. "It's no skin off your nose! Lemme go. I didn't steal nothing from you. Why're you... Lemme go... Please! Think of the trouble I'll be in. Lemme go!"

Grandpa Varava never said a word. You'd've thought he was deaf. At last we reached the village.

"Put the fish in the net, swing it over your shoulder and let's go!" Crandpa Varava said.

And Knysh followed his orders. I was amazed: everything'd gone off without a hitch. Not a shot had been fired. There'd been no fight. And we didn't even have to tie Knysh up. There was some kind of power on Grandpa Varava's side that Knysh didn't dare disobey.

It was all as easy as pie from then on. We went to Valigura's house and called him. The militiaman came out to the porch in his slippers. He looked sleepy, but he had on his uniform and even his cap.

"Ah. I see. Come on inside," he said when he saw us.

We followed him in. He sat down at the table and began writing a report. He kept on writing for a long time, stopping to cock his head and read over what he'd written.

"Will the witnesses please sign here," he finally said and poked his finger at the bottom of the page.

Cuckoorusoe and I turned red. We'd never signed anything before.

"Come on," said Grandpa Varava after he'd signed his name and handed me the pen.

I scrawled my name and handed it to Java. He signed his name with a flourish, just like a grown man. I was so sorry I hadn't done the same and was ashamed of my childish scrawl.

Valigura smiled, patted Java on the back and said, "Good for you. You've a fine signature." Then he added, "Thank you very much, all of you," and shook Grandpa Varava's hand and then each of ours.

After that we left, but Knysh stayed on. As I walked along I was saying to myself, "That takes care of that. We're really heroes! We caught a real poacher. Well, maybe we didn't do it all by ourselves, but if not for us he wouldn't have been caught at all. That's for sure. Now the whole village'll know about us. And even the whole district. And maybe even the whole region. And there might even be something about us in the papers. And on the radio. And on TV, too. Why not? And Grebeniuchka's eyes'll shine when she looks at me, and she'll feel proud to say she knows me. And Karafolka'll die of envy, choking on all those good marks of his. And everybody'll be saying: 'What d'you know? What fine boys they are! Real heroes'."

Unfortunately, nothing of the kind would happen, because Java didn't want anyone to know about the desert island, or about him being Robinson Cuckoorusoe, or about any of the rest of it. That's why we wouldn't be able to talk about it. He even asked Grandpa Varava and Valigura to keep it a secret.

We'd be just as unknown to the world as ever. "Oh, well," I said to myself.

That evening Robinson Cuckoorusoe left his desert island (to be known forever after as Re-examination Island) and moved back to the mainland. No bands were playing, no photographers were snapping pictures, and thousands of people carrying bouquets of flowers were not crowding the banks to welcome the returning hero.

All was still except for a dog barking here and there in the village and the frogs croaking in the reeds.

The summer was over. Our carefree vacation had ended, and once again we sat at our desks. Once again the bell rang for recess every forty-five minutes. Once again we heard the familiar: "Those who have not done their homework will please raise their hands", "Go to the board" and "Leave the classroom!" The everyday life of 6B, formerly known as 5B, was proceeding uneventfully.

I sat at my usual place by the window watching Sobakevich, the school mutt, racing around the yard. I was thinking of all that had happened during the summer: the desert island, Knysh and the young pathfinders.

Once again I wondered whether Java had come to the island by chance, whether it had been luck and fate working together that had taken him to where Knysh poached.

I asked Java about it, but all he did was smile. Somehow, though, I feel it was no accident. When I'd been away visiting in Kiev he'd probably tailed Knysh and hatched the plan of going off to the island. That Cuckoorusoe was a smart kid!

The teacher's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Go to the board, Ren," she said.

Someone jostled my right elbow. It was my friend and neighbour Cuckoorusoe standing up. Yes, he'd passed his exam (did you ever doubt it?) and had been promoted to the sixth grade, too.

Ah, those had been terrible days after we returned from the desert island. At first I spent my time outside his house, shushing everyone. I shushed their dog Polkan, to keep him from barking. I shushed their cow Contribution, to keep her from mooing. I shushed their pig Manuna, to keep her from grunting. I made sure no one interfered with his studies. Then I said it'd be better if we studied for the exam together, since I'd forgotten all I knew and had to review it, too.

"I don't need any sacrifices from you," Java said.

"D'you want to be better than me? To know everything when I don't know a thing? That's not fair. Friends aren't like that," I said.

We spent all of August studying. I can't say it was fun, more fun than playing soccer, or tip-cat, or going fishing, but who ever said you've only got to do things that're fun for your friends?

I went along with Cuckoorusoe on the day of his re-examination, and we took the dictation together. Galina Sidorovna, our teacher, guessed why I'd come.

"Take a seat. You can take the dictation, too. It'll do you good," she said.

And you know, Java made out better than me, 'cause he only made two mistakes, but I made three. That's because he'd taken his grammar book along to the desert island, and all the time I was in Kiev he must've been doing something else besides cutting up beets and potatoes.

Java went up to the board and wrote out a column of difficult words. And he didn't make a single mistake.

By the way, he has a slip of paper with an address written on it stuck between the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*. I don't think anybody'd keep an address if he wasn't going to write any letters.

That's why I think knowing grammar is something Java needs for his own good, too. You can't write an honour pupil a letter that's full of mistakes. Why, you might as well go jump in the lake before you ever start.

"Good for you, Ren! Go back to your seat," Galina Sidorovna said.

My friend walked down the aisle proudly and slowly. He was silent for a few minutes after he sat down, waiting till the pleasure the teacher's praise had brought on had settled a bit. Then he leaned over to me and whispered, "Let's give it a try."

"Let's."

We bent down under our desk. Java pulled a flat, round little tin box from under his jacket. There were tiny wires and screws in the lid. It was our invention, a mechanical button-unbuttoner.

We hadn't thought of a name for it yet and so just called it a thingamajig. It was easy to work it. You held it close to your button and pressed a screw. That was all there was to it. Except that you had to wind it up first. Java began winding it up. This wasn't a transistor-run device, and there weren't any semi-conductors in it, but still–

Zzz-inng! went the spring inside the box as it flew out and hit Karafolka, who had the desk in front of us. Smack on the backside.

"Owww!" Karafolka yelled.

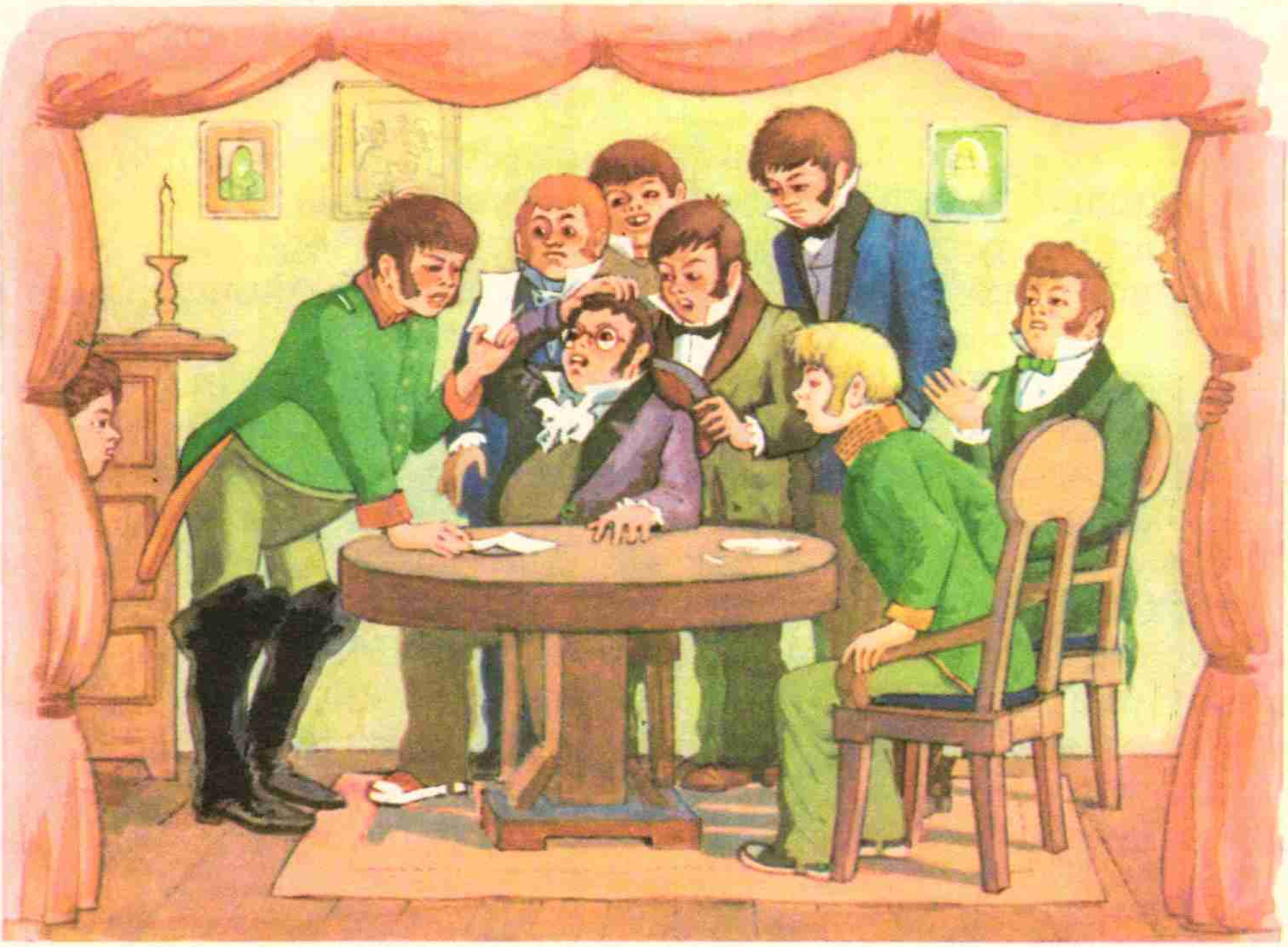
"Stupid!" I whispered to Java.

But it was too late. We could hear Galina Sidorovna's voice above us: "Zavgorodny and Ren! Leave the classroom!"

We crawled out from under the desk shamefacedly and headed meekly towards the door.

The new term had begun.

THE STRANGER FROM APT. 13 OR THE CROOKS TRACK DOWN THE VICTIM. AN ADVENTURE STORY, as TOLD BY JAVA REN AND PAVLIK ZAVGORODNY



Chapter 1

"AH," SAID JAVA AND I

I fixed my sideburns, stood on tiptoe and peeped through the peephole in the curtain. My heart was pounding. I felt faint.

I'm sure I wasn't the first person ever to look through a peephole in a curtain. I'm sure every famous actor's done the same. They all saw the audience talking and smiling as they took their seats. And the actors all felt as faint-hearted, especially if it was a premiere. Today was our premiere.

"Move! Let me have a look."

Someone's hot cheek was pushing my head away from the peephole. It belonged to Stepan Karafolka. At any other time

I would've socked him hard, but this time I had no strength to. My strength was being used up on stage fright.

A normal person inhales and then exhales, but when a person's got stage fright I think he only exhales, though I don't know where he gets all the air to do it.

I was walking up and down the stage, exhaling. In case you think I was the only one doing that, you're mistaken. All the other actors and actresses were walking up and down, exhaling. All that air blowing around raised a wind that made the backdrops sway. It riffled the curtain and raised a cloud of dust from the floorboards. If our village community centre had been made out of rubber instead of bricks it would've blown up and burst like a balloon. Then we would've all flown off into outer space: the actors, the sets, Miron the accordionist who was now playing the last polka before the curtain went up, Dora Semyonovna, the ice cream vendor, and the audience.

Oh, that audience! That was the cause of all my trouble. Just yesterday these were all such nice, kind people, old friends who'd always lend a helping hand if called upon: Nikolai Pavlovich, Grandpa Varava, Grandpa Salivon, Andrei Kekalo, the director of the community centre, Aunt Ganna, Grandma Marusya, and Papa and Mama. They'd do anything for me.

But now? Now even my own mother wasn't my mother any more. She was a part of the audience.

There wasn't a single living soul on my side of the curtain who wasn't wobbly in the knees, from Galina Sidorovna, our literature teacher and the director of the play, all the way down to Petya Pashko, a frog-voiced third-grader who was in charge of raising and dropping the curtain. Everyone was worried. Still Java and I had a worse case of stage fright than anybody else. There was a reason for this: we'd started the whole business. We'd cooked up the whole idea of a theatre.

Why, Java and I were like Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko in our Vasukovka Art Theatre (to be known as VAT).

"Yes, we can!" Java'd shouted excitedly last autumn. "You know what kind of a theatre we'll have? It'll be famous throughout the district! It'll be a real Art Theatre! Except that it won't be in Moscow, it'll be our own Vasukovka theatre. It'll be called the Vasukovka Art Theatre. Why not? We'll go on the road. The Moscow Art Theatre just got back from an American tour. Not bad, eh?"

He didn't have to convince me, because I was already Nemirovich-Danchenko. He'd have to convince Galina Sidorovna and the school board. Actually, we didn't even have to work on Galina Sidorovna, because she was all for it from the start.

"Good for you, boys! That's a wonderful idea!" she'd said. "I've been thinking about a school drama group, but I just haven't gotten around to it. Since it's your idea, you draw up a list of children who want to join. You'll be in charge."

We felt as proud as peacocks that day. We never giggled once or tripped anyone up. We canvassed all the grades, feeling very serious and important as we made up the list. At first it was as long as a streamer, because most of the kids signed up. (Luckily, as is usually the case, ninety per cent soon dropped out.) We got so tired making that list that towards the end we began getting choosy.

"You're too– quiet," Java said to Kolya Kagarlitsky. "You're just like a mouse. When you get up on the stage nobody'll even hear you." When Kolya blushed Java felt sorry for him and said, "Well, maybe you can be in the crowd scenes. You'll be an extra." And he wrote Kolya's name down.

At the first session of our drama group we were to choose a play. There was a big discussion. There were dozens of plays,

from "Othello" to "Three Sisters", but they were all love stories and, as Galina Sidorovna said, we were still too young for that. She was right. After all, you couldn't expect me to kiss Ganya Grebeniuchka with everybody watching, could you? I'd rather kiss a goat.

At last Galina Sidorovna said, "We'll put on 'The Inspector General'. In the first place, it's not a love story. Secondly, we'll soon be studying the works of Gogol and this will help you greatly. Thirdly, 'The Inspector General' is a very funny and instructive play. And the cast of characters is very big, so there'll be a part for everyone."

We all began reading the play. It was a great comedy, and if we did a good job of it the audience'd be rolling in the aisles. The roles had to be parcelled out, and there was a hitch from the very start. Java and I, as the founders of VAT, each wanted to star, and that was only natural. But in this play there was only one starring role: Khlestakov. I felt the part was written especially for me. Didn't Gogol write that Khlestakov was "very thin and lean ... addle-brained ... incapable of focusing his attention on any thought whatever..."? There could be no doubt about it.

But Java said, "Ha! Go look at yourself in the mirror. You'll see you're as much like Khlestakov as a pig's like a horse. The only thing that's the same is you've got two hands, two feet and a head. Khlestakov's a spitefire! He's– like this!" And he thrust out his chest, raised his chin and made his lower lip droop.

"Ha!" said I. "Just look at you! Yikes! Khlestakov! You're a scarecrow, that's what! A crocodile! Leggo! I said leggo of my shirt or I'll crack you one!"

Galina Sidorovna said Kolya Kagarlitsky would be Khlestakov.

We had just as hard a time with the other roles. There was only one mayor, Skvoznik-Dmukhanovsky, only one judge, only one supervisor of charitable institutions, and– still and all,

"The Inspector General" is a great play. Gogol was a real genius. You'd think he'd known that Java and I were going to play in "The Inspector General" and so put in Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky. Two identical roles. Especially for us, so's neither of us'd be offended. They weren't really starring roles, but you can take my word for it: everything would've been in a big mess without Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky. In fact, there wouldn't have been any play to begin with. Kolya Kagarlitsky wouldn't have been Khlestakov, because Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky were the ones who decided Khlestakov was an inspector general. That's what.

The moment we understood how important they were we made up.

Rehearsals began.

Golly!

For some reason Java and I were positive we could act. After all, all you had to do was prance around and do all sorts of tricks, and we were famous for that.

"You're a bunch of comedians!" That's what Grandpa Salivon called us.

He was a good judge about things like that, because long ago, when he'd been young, he'd played the bass tuba in an army band. He still had his tuba up in the attic. It looked like a great big snail. On holidays, when Grandpa Salivon has a couple of drinks, he gets down his tuba and plays it. The old women cross themselves when they hear the booming and say it's like the Archangel Gabriel playing his horn. The village dogs like his playing best of all. They go on barking far into the night after each of his performances. That's why, if Grandpa Salivon said we were comedians, you could take his word for it.

But something seemed to happen to us during rehearsals. We couldn't even recognize ourselves. We were like a couple of slugs, like a couple of sacks of sawdust. That's when we realized that it was one thing to say whatever came into your head

and play the fool (as my pa would say), but quite another thing to say words that'd been written by somebody else, that is, to play a role.

We didn't speak our parts, we sounded like we were chewing our cud. We felt miserable. There was a bitter taste in my mouth and an icy feeling in my stomach.

"Never mind," said Java. He was trying to sound cheerful. "We'll show them at the opening. Just you wait!"

"What for? For us to flop?"

"You sure are chicken-hearted. Even the greatest actors got nervous during rehearsals. Galina Sidorovna said so. Remember? So cheer up."

I was trying to cheer up as best as I could, and I was grateful to Gogol for not giving Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky any more words to speak than he did, because we were having a hard enough time as it was. It was worse than the worst kind of homework. Learning a poem by heart for school is torture. Well, at least in a poem there's some rhyming words at the end of the lines to help you remember it. But here it was just sentences with nothing to hold onto. As long as you looked at the paper with all your words written down they sort of hung together, but the minute you put the paper away they'd fly off. And you can't hold a piece of paper up in front of your face onstage.

"Let's learn our parts, Java," I said. "See how hard Karafolka's studying his? And Grebeniuchka even stayed home from the movies twice."

"You want me to cram? Never! Cramming's for dopes. We're both smart. How about thinking up an emblem for our theatre? There's a seagull on the curtain of the Moscow Art Theatre. What if we have a duck, or a goose, or a rooster with a lot of bright feathers? Hm?"

"I don't know."

"We still have time to think of something. Let's go down to

the river. I found a fox's burrow on the bank. Maybe we can flush it out."

I trudged off after him.

A day passed, and another.

"Listen, Java,"I said a week later, "let's start learning our parts. I don't know any of mine yet."

"Aw, if we get stuck the prompter'll help us. He's real good."

It was true. The prompter, Kuzma Barilo, was the school champ in prompting. He sat in the last row, but you felt he was whispering right in your ear when he prompted you.

Vasukovka village was waiting for the opening as anxiously as if we were the best company in the country. 'Specially after Grandpa Salivon was at one of our rehearsals. He'd been repairing the chairs in the auditorium when we trooped in. At first he hadn't paid any attention to us. He just went on hammering. But after a while the hammering stopped. He was listening to us murdering the first act. Stepan Karafolka, the mayor, was onstage. He thrust out his stomach (puffed up with pillows) and in a deep bass voice (it's a wonder where it came from!) he was saying to the police captain (played by Vasya Derkach): "...Sergeant Pugovitsyn ... he's tall, so you can post him on the bridge to keep law and order. Then clear away the old fence next to the shoemaker's as quick as you can, and put up a straw marker, as if surveyors were doing some leveling. The more pulling-down there is, the more proof of activity it is on the part of the mayor. Drat! I've forgotten that there's about forty cartloads of trash piled up against that fence. What a rotten town this is: you no sooner set up some monument, or even a fence, than you discover everyone's heaping trash up there, and the devil only knows where they find it!"

At this point in the play it says: "He sighs." Karafolka, following the author's instructions, heaved a sigh and paused. Grandpa Salivon, who'd apparently been dying to put in a few words, rushed into the breach.

"That son-of-a-gun!" he yelled. "That specialist!" (For some reason or other "specialist" was one of his worst curse words.) "That faker! Why, he's the spitting image of Pripikhaty, our former chairman! That's just what he used to do whenever the brass came checking. It's a good play. That fellow who wrote it knows his beans!"

By evening the whole village was talking about the play. Even the oldest of old women who'd never heard of such words before, were mumbling: "The Inspector General". What a joke! Old Granny Garbuzikha who was quite deaf told her cronies that play was written by Kurochka, a correspondent of the district newspaper who'd once visited Vasukovka, and not by somebody named Gogol; and that the play was all about Pripikhaty, the former chairman. But since he now had an important job in the region, Kurochka'd made up a play about olden times and signed it "Gogol" on purpose.

Ivan Shapka, the present collective farm chairman, had a good laugh when he heard about all that talk. He allotted us a big sum of money for sets and costumes. We really were lucky. Our drawing teacher helped us with the sets, and a whole bunch of girls worked on the costumes. We'd been busy all winter preparing and rehearsing. And now...

If a thief had wandered into Vasukovka that evening he could've walked off with anything from any of the houses, because there wasn't a single person in any of them. Every last village dog was also outside the community centre, attending a dog party.

Why, even Trindichka, the vet's great-great grandmother who was a hundred and seven years old and who, according to Grandpa Salivon, would soon be cutting her third set of teeth and was starting out on her second round of life, and whom some doctors from Kiev came to see to find out how she'd managed to live so long (Java and I knew why: she ate wormwood, we'd seen her eating it. We tried some, but it was too bitter, so we only ate it once. But when we're old, maybe then...

But maybe we won't want to live that long if we have to eat such awful stuff), even Trindichka, who hadn't left her yard in thirty years, had never been to the movies and had stopped going to church, to say nothing of the community centre, even she came hobbling over to see the play.

"There! What'd I say!" Grandpa Salivon bellowed. "See? She's learning to walk again. She'll soon start dancing."

Granny Trindichka whacked her cane across his neck to everyone's delight. But wait...

R-ring! R-ring! R-ring! The third and last bell rang. The lights went down.

"Into the wings! Into the wings!" Galina Sidorovna hissed at us (at those of us who weren't supposed to be onstage in Scene I).

The curtain parted creakily (the iron rings were strung on a rusty wire). This was it. We were on. There was no backing out now.

"I have invited you here, gentlemen, in order to..." Stepan Karafolka began.

We were off and running.

I stood in the wings. My eyes were shut tight. I pressed my fists to my chest and whispered: "It'll be all right! It'll be all right! It'll be all right!" Like a charm. I'd felt the same way when I first got up the courage to dive into the river from the top of the old willow. I'd stood there on a branch looking down, feeling as if my heart had jumped out of me and was flying down into the water, but I'd just stood there, clutching the trunk, unable to let go. My head had spun and my stomach had heaved. Still, that was child's play compared to what awaited me now. I'd've gladly dived from a TV tower just to know that everything'd end well.

"Ha-ha-ha!" the audience laughed. What a devil that Karafolka was! He'd even sounded funny during rehearsals.

"You've nothing to worry about, stupid," I said to myself.

We'd be on in another moment now. As soon as Karafolka said– There was our cue!

"You just wait for the door to open and *bang*!" Karafolka, mayor, said.

My heart skipped a beat and Java and I shot out onto the stage.

"An extraordinary event!" Java yelled.

"Such unexpected news!" I yelled just as loudly.

"Why, what is it?" everyone onstage said anxiously.

We were great. There wasn't a peep from the audience.

"A most unforeseen affair," I shouted. "We were just at the inn..."

"Pyotr Ivanovich and I were just at the inn..." Java interrupted.

The audience was silent. "Good for us! We've slayed them!" I said to myself and, like a conqueror, looked out at the rows. I saw dozens of eyes. And all of them were staring at me. And–

"Ah!" I said, interrupting Java. I knew that at that moment I was supposed to say "Ah!". But after that... I felt as if someone'd blown air into my ear, sending all my thoughts out through the other ear. My head was empty. There wasn't a single word left in my memory and not a trace of any thoughts. Nothing. You'd think I was a calf that could only moo. All that was left in my head was that "Ah!" It was rattling around, knocking against the insides of my skull.

"Ah!" I repeated and looked at Java. He was looking at me. I guessed that all his thoughts had vanished, too. So I said "Ah!" a third time.

"Ah!" Java replied, just to say something. He couldn't just stand there with his mouth shut.

We stared at each other.

"Ah!" I shouted.

"Ah!" Java replied.

Then we stared at each other again. There was laughter in the

audience. They probably thought this was all in the play. There was old Granny Trindichka smiling toothlessly. Her chin shook, her face was all crumpled up. (I bet she hadn't laughed like that in years.)

"He-he-he! Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!" Everybody was laughing.

Kuzma stuck his head out of the prompter's box. He mouthed each syllable. He was telling us what to say. A deaf mute would've understood him. Then the mayor, Stepan Karafolka, began prompting us. Then Sashka Guz, the postmaster, began to also. The people sitting in the front rows caught on, and others, who'd heard Kuzma prompting us, began prompting us, too.

I could understand the words, but they kept scattering, like a flock of sheep. Like some halfwit shepherd, I couldn't herd them together. If somebody had asked me my name then I probably wouldn't've been able to say anything, either. The people in the back rows were still laughing. They thought everything was coming along just fine. I could even hear someone shout: "Good for you, boys!"

That did it. I dashed into the wings, knocking over one of the props on the way, and kept on running down the deserted village street with the wind whistling in my sideburns. I finally came to my senses in the willow thicket by the river. I fell into the grass, rolled around and groaned. I was disgraced, ashamed and completely crushed. When my first attack of despair ended I saw that my friend Java-Bobchinsky was rolling around and groaning, too.

We didn't say a word when we looked at each other squarely. What had we done? We'd not only been a terrible flop, the disgrace of Vasukovka, but we'd let everyone else down, too. We'd ruined a great play! Though Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky aren't the stars, this wonderful play was written in such a way that the whole piece hangs together because of them.

We had run away, leaving everything in a shambles. It was

awful. We'd created a panic. Now Karafolka and all the other characters would never find out that Khlestakov (Kolya Kagarlitsky) had just arrived, was in the inn and was supposed to be an inspector general. The two of us, Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, were supposed to announce this piece of news. No one else could do it. Only us! That fine actor Karafolka was now standing in the middle of the stage, not knowing what to do. And all the other actors who were onstage in Scene I were standing around looking miserable. And there in the wings was Kolya Kagarlitsky, the most gifted of us all, who'd never have a chance to go on at all. He'd been so good as Khlestakov during rehearsals! How'd he been able to act like that? None of us boys had ever palled around with him. He'd always been so mousey. He couldn't dive from a tree; he couldn't shoot a slingshot good enough to hit a window. He usually sat around under a tree with his nose in a book. But you should've seen him onstage! No one would ever see him act now.

Granny Trindichka, who may have come to spend a cultural evening for the very first time in a hundred years, would now have to trudge back home and listen to the crickets on the hearth. The audience was probably on their way home now, cursing a theatre which had such no-account actors.

Meanwhile, the no-account actors were lying on the grass, staring up at the sky and feeling miserable. No one in the world,

no one in the Universe could ever've felt so miserable. How could we ever show our faces in the village again? How could we go on living after what'd happened? What had we done? Woe is us! Why'd we ever have to invent VAT? Life had been so happy and gay. What more did we want? We wanted to go on tour, that's what. To become famous and hear the crowds roar. We deserved to be whipped.

It was all because of Kiev. Kiev was to blame. And the Kiev militia. And that darn trough. And Valya. And Maxim Valerianovich. And the gold-plated watch. And the– drowned man. The drowned man was to blame most of all. But let's start from the beginning.

Chapter 2

A CHASE IN THE METRO.
THE METRO COSMONAUT.
A RUN-IN WITH THE KIEV MILITIA

We spent a month in Kiev last summer, visiting my aunt and uncle. It was great. We'd been looking forward to the trip all year. Naturally, we'd been in Kiev before: Java once and I twice. But the first time was only for two days with a class excursion, and the second time I was there alone, without Java. And that wasn't much fun. Everyone knows that if you can't share the fun with your best friend it's not really the best kind of fun. Not even half of the best kind of fun. Probably only about maybe a quarter.

What d'you start with if you've just come to Kiev? Right! You go to Kreshchatik. That's what everybody does. You take your bags to wherever you're staying and go straight to Kreshchatik. My aunt only had time to shout: "Don't get lost! Be back in time for din..." We didn't hear the rest.

Twenty minutes after we got off the train we were walking down Kreshchatik. Did I say walking? We were sailing, we were soaring, we were marching as if we were on parade. You can't just stroll down Kreshchatik, because it's a most unusual street. Anyone who goes there seems to become a different person, as happy as if he's going to a party, and very polite and friendly, too. And everybody keeps smiling. Though it's always crowded, I never saw anyone jostling anyone else there, or snapping at anyone else. If somebody shoves somebody else by accident he'll say "Excuse me", smile and go on. The people on Kreshchatik are really nice. That's how they should be on every other street, too. Well, we sailed, and soared, and marched along.

The Kreshchatik is as broad as the Dnieper River (that's what the announcers say on holidays). Its banks are sidewalks, with cars streaming down the middle. You'll never see a car on the sidewalk, and you'll never see a person on the road. Each has his own place. There are underpasses all along the street so's the cars and people don't get into each other's way.

"I bet it's easier to get hit by a wagon back home than to get hit by a car here," I said to myself. Just as I said that a man dashed across the street. He was bald, wore sunglasses and had a camera slung over his shoulder. He was wearing shorts, and his legs were lumpy and hairy. You could see he was a tourist right away.

We stopped in our tracks. Would he make it across the street? A whistle blew, and a young mustached militiaman appeared from nowhere. The man stopped before he'd gotten very far and dashed back again. The militiaman smiled and shook his finger at him, like a teacher would at a naughty boy, even though the man was twice his age.

"See that?" Java said, looking at the handsome militiaman. "You know, Pavlik, there's nothing better than being a militiaman. In the first place, you're doing a good job, because you're fighting crime; in the second place, everybody respects you and does as you say. I think I'm going to be a militiaman when I grow up. How about you?"

"You know I'm going to be a pilot."

"That's up to you."

Java changed his mind about what he was going to be when he grew up every day in the week. One day he was going to be the captain of an ocean liner, the next he was going to be a geologist. Then he decided he'd be the manager of a candy factory so he could eat as much candy as he wanted to every single day. Then he was going to be a soccer player, then an artist, then a big game hunter. And now he decided he was going to be a militiaman.

I wasn't like him at all. I'd decided I was going to be a pilot way back in the first grade, and that was what I was going to be. Even Grandpa Salivon'd said a while back: "Look at that stubborn mule! I guess he's going to be a pilot after all, drat him!"

Sometimes, though, the temptation's too great and I go along with Java, but in such a way that I can be a pilot and still do whatever he's going to be doing. I was going to be a navy pilot, and a soccer-pilot and an artist-pilot, and a big game hunter-pilot, and a geologist-pilot, and even a candy factory pilot (the one who delivers the candy by air).

But this time I didn't go along with him, because I couldn't imagine how I could be a militiaman-pilot. What could I do up in the air to fight crime? Arrest birds? No, this time I'd just be a pilot.

We sailed, and soared, and marched down Kreshchatik.

The large houses looked like huge tiled ovens climbing the hill to Pechorsk. A department store's big windows glittered in the sun. Farther on was the City Soviet. In the distance the TV tower stuck straight up into the sky. I'd never seen anything higher. What a neat place to hide from ma when I'd gotten a D! You couldn't compare it to our pear tree. Why, she'd never drag me off that tower. In fact, I wouldn't even hear her scolding me.

After a while we came to a Metro station. I'd like to see anyone come to Kiev from Vasukovka Village and pass up the Metro! We turned towards the station together. A blast of pleasant cool air that had a smell you'll only find in the Metro hit us. We weren't going to try and slip between the turnstiles with the lighted words "Deposit 5 kopecks" without paying our fare. Somebody who's stupid can try that. We tried it once. No matter how fast you run by two arms pop out of the sides and kick you in the stomach. Wow!

We changed some coins into 5-kopeck pieces, each dropped one in the slot and passed through like decent folks.

"We're real grownup," I was saying to myself proudly. If I'd only known what was about to happen.

"Look! Look! There's Sergeant Palyanichko!" Java shouted. "Let's catch up with him!"

I'd just had time to open my mouth and say: "Huh? Where?" when Java dashed down the escalator.

There was a fat man standing a few steps below us. He had two baskets on his arm, two sacks were slung over his shoulder, front and back, and he was clutching a new trough.

A few steps below him was a young lady with a fancy hairdo who looked just like a movie star. Still farther down was a militiaman whose back really did look just like Sergeant Palyanichko's. We'd met him in Kiev the year before. It'd be great to meet him here again and have a chat, especially since Java was going to be a militiaman, starting from today.

I clattered down the escalator steps after Java. He'd managed to slip by the fat man whose baskets and trough were blocking most of the free space around him. When I tried to squeeze by I knocked against the trough which he'd stood on edge and was holding with a couple of fingers. The trough went banging and clanging down the escalator.

Bang! It bumped into the backs of the movie star's legs. She plopped into it and went scooting on down.

We were stunned.

The gorgeous movie star was sitting in a trough, clutching at the sides and speeding downwards. She hadn't screamed or anything. Maybe she was very brave. Or maybe she was so stunned she didn't know what'd hit her. A moment later the militiaman went tumbling. The movie star sped on.

By now the fat man was racing down the stairs after his trough. He didn't even glance at us. He was galloping down the stairs with his baskets and sacks joggling, and shouting: «Watch out! Watch out!»

The young lady in the trough knocked some other people over, shot off the last step of the escalator, scooted across the long platform and came to a stop beside an elderly man who looked at her in surprise and said sternly:

"What kind of a game is this, young lady?"

The fat man was still clumping down the stairs, shouting, "My trough, my trough!" But he didn't sound very worried.

The militiaman who'd been knocked over (it wasn't Sergeant Polyanichko after all) was now hurrying after the fat man, straightening his jacket on the way and shouting, though you couldn't tell who he was shouting at, "Wait! Stop! Wait!"

We were still running after the militiaman. It was the only thing we could do, since we were on the down escalator. Luckily, the militiaman had no idea of who had started the commotion. He was chasing after the fat man and wasn't paying any attention to us, but he'd soon discover the truth. At any moment now he'd catch up with the fat man, who'd say– My knees felt weak. Happily, we reached the bottom just then.

The movie star, who had probably just come to her senses, was smiling. She was still sitting in the trough, and she sounded very cheerful as she said, "Touchdown. Weightlessness and overloads had no harmful effects."

Everyone laughed. We didn't see the rest of the welcome she got from the militiaman and the other passengers who crowded around her, because we dashed into a waiting train. The doors slid shut, and we were off.

At the next station, Arsenalskaya, we ran out and up the escalator. We were running so fast I thought my heart was going to burst. There are two escalators on that station: one starts where the other leaves off, and both are very long.

We ran out of the Metro, turned the corner into the yard of

a large gray house and collapsed near some bushes. We were both winded. I couldn't move an arm or a leg. I couldn't even speak. I couldn't even breathe. We were gasping for air like fishes out of water. A three-year-old girl could have easily take each of us by a foot, slung us into a sack, taken us to the market and sold us there at two kopecks apiece. That's all we were worth right then. After about ten minutes Java said,

"Whew!"

"Ohh," I said.

"Golly!"

"You said it."

That's the only kind of conversation we were up to. About twenty minutes later we finally came to our senses and were able to discuss what'd happened.

"Gee, you sure did mess everything up. Who'll let me be a militiaman now?"

"I did not! What's it got to do with me? Nobody saw me. And nothing happened, did it?"

"That's what you think. The fat man saw you, and the militiaman saw you. He was looking at us when we raced by. And militiamen have good memories. They've got to."

"Dry up."

"Maybe they're looking for us right this minute. Maybe they've sent out our descriptions, and you know what that means." Java held up his fist to show me how much weight that carried. He knew all about things like that from the time he'd been in training to become an intelligence man.

"Well, what's so awful? We didn't do anything!" I said, trying to calm my own fears even more than his. "I knocked over a trough by accident. I didn't do it on purpose."

"You try to prove that. That fat man'll say you did it on purpose to get himself out of the mess. And anyway, I bet you

nothing like that ever happened in the Metro before, and you say..."

"The Metro's an unlucky place. Remember the trouble we had last time? And how..."

"Everything happens in pairs," Java said.

Maybe there really was a law of pairs, the one Pa'd told me about. I don't know whether he was kidding me when he said that all kinds of trouble always come in pairs: if something bad happens, you can be sure something else that's bad is going to happen real soon.

"It's a lousy law. We don't want any more trouble today," Java said. All of a sudden he smiled. "Boy, did she ever zoom down the escalator in that trough!"

"You'd think she was in a rocket ship. *Swoosh*! And she was gone! I wouldn't have minded taking a ride like that myself," I said. It was a relief to see that Java wasn't talking about us being hauled in any more.

"Where do we go now?" he said, getting up.

"It's all the same to me. We can go to the Fun House, or to the movies, or to the Zoo."

"Sure, but..."

"But what?"

"But if..."

"Well? If what?"

"Just the two of us–. If we could find them– You know, the kids from Kiev. Igor, Sashko the Pilot– They're great," he said, looking up at the sky so's not to have to look at me.

I stared at him and smiled to myself. So he was dying to look up the boys, was he? Why, I could see right through him. As clear as through glass! I wasn't one of those Kiev hunters who could be tricked as easy as pie. Why, those hunters, the ones who came to Vasukovka to hunt or fish, would ask us to catch them grasshoppers for bait. A little matchbox full was worth five kopecks. I'd be killing myself, catching those grasshoppers,

like I was some galley-slave or something. But Java'd put a pinch of hay in the bottom of the matchbox, then lay a couple of grasshoppers on top of it and run off to collect his five kopecks. If he was caught at this kind of cheating he'd look at them real innocent-like and say: "I had to give the grasshoppers some food, didn't I?"

Well, I wasn't as dumb as those Kiev hunters. "Sure, that'll be great. But how'll we find them? We don't know their addresses. Oh, remember, Valya gave you hers? You must've thrown it out, though, didn't you? Keeping a girl's address sure would be a dumb thing to do."

Wow! Java's cheeks got so red you'd think somebody'd slapped him. I wonder what comes over people sometimes? You take a big brave fellow like Java and look what happens to him. You'd think he was a wilted flower. On account of what? On account of some beanpole of a girl. Ugh!

Back on Re-examination Island Java'd turned into a real wilted flower after talking to Valya for exactly one minute. And she'd left him her address, so's we could write and tell her all about the rest of our poacher mission. You'd think it was the most interesting thing in the world to her all of a sudden.

After we'd become such heroes in the Knysh case Java kept suggesting we write to Valya, and he always tried to sound as if he was kidding. "Are you nuts?" I said to him. "I never even get around to writing to my folks when I'm in camp, and you want us to..." He didn't dare write himself, because he wasn't too sure of his spelling, so nothing ever came of it. But he'd saved her address.

Even before we got to Kiev I was sure that sooner or later he'd get around to talking about Valya, but I didn't think it would be this soon. If not for the trough business, I'd never've given in so fast. I was glad he'd forgotten about the militia having our descriptions and looking for us, and so I decided to meet him half-way.

"Come on, cheer up! Sure, it'll be great to see Igor and Sashko, and Valya. They'll take us around and show us all the interesting sites. What's Valya's address again? I forgot it."

Java mumbled the address.

"Why, this is the street! It starts right here near the Metro and goes off as far as the monastery. Come on!"

Java smiled crookedly.

Chapter 3

JAVA'S IN A HURRY TO SEE A GIRL. THE EAR

A few minutes later we were outside Valya's house, but when we started looking for her apartment, we couldn't find it. We checked every single one. The last apartment on the top floor was No. 18. We were looking for No. 25. Had she fooled us? Had she given us a fake address? It broke my heart to look at Java. I decided to ask an old lady for directions. She said that No. 25 was in the wing around the corner.

"All those wings and feathers just to get you mixed up," Java muttered and tried to sound angry. Actually, he was trying not to grin. That's how happy he was.

There was another big six-storey apartment house in the yard. It was just like the one we'd been in. I couldn't see why it was called a wing.

In the downstairs lobby Java stopped by the big, old-fashioned glass doors for a second. He looked at his reflection in the glass and smoothed down his hair. I made-believe I hadn't noticed.

We had no trouble finding apt. 25 on the third floor. There was a name plate under the bell, and the name on it was "Malinovsky". That was Valya's last name.

"You ring," Java whispered.

"You ring," I whispered back and a chill ran down my spine.

"Go on, you're taller than me. You can reach the bell easier," Java said.

"She gave you the address, so you ring." He wasn't going to tell me what to do.

"To hell with you!" Java whispered angrily and pressed the button. We could hear a bell ring inside.

Java darted behind me. Oh, no, you don't! I spun around and tried to push him forward. Just then something unbelievable happened. A huge hand attached to a huge man appeared from someplace and grabbed Java by the ear and as it did a voice roared so loudly the echo went rolling down the stairs,

"Aha! I got you! I caught you at last!"

Both Java, whose ear was being tweaked, and I, too, froze to the spot.

The terrible voice thundered on: "So this is who's been annoying us! So this is who's been ringing our doorbells and running away! And poor old granny on her tired old feet has to come to the door every time to find out that there's no one there. Well, we're going to have a little talk."

That's when we heard Valya calling out from behind her door: "Who's there?"

Oh-oh! I was panic-stricken and glanced at Java. He tensed and jerked so hard that I could see he was ready to leave his ear in the man's clutches just to get away. What was an ear? At that moment Java was ready to sacrifice half of his head, half of his body, just to be free and escape with whatever was left of him, to get as far away as possible from Valya's door.

Imagine: at the very first moment of a meeting he'd been looking forward to for so long his friend Valya'd see (ye gods!) the huge fellow dangling him by the ear as if he was a puppy who'd left a puddle on the floor. And Java would be dangling there miserably. He'd dreamed of the great moment the door would open... She'd be standing there. Her long lashes would flutter in pleasant surprise, her eyes would shine, and her cheeks would become rosy-red. And she'd say: "Oh!", and then she'd say: "My!", and then she'd say: "Hello. Is it really you? I'm so glad to see you." And everything would be just wonderful.

But instead...

We rattled down the stairs so fast you'd think we'd been shot out of a cannon. Then we dashed into the yard and from there to the street, and we kept on running to the end of the block without even looking back. Not until we were positive that no one was chasing us did we finally slow down to a walk. We kept on walking in silence, breathing hard, not caring where we were going.

Tears were running down Java's cheeks. He kept wincing and turning his face away, but I understood. It wasn't his fault. It was just that somehow a person's ears are connected to the place that produces tears. And if your ear got twisted hard the

tears would just start streaming down your face by themselves. That didn't mean you were crying. Java'd never cried in his life. His ear was all swollen. It was twice as big as the other one, and it was flaming red. He could never go back to see Valya looking like that.

It wasn't hard to figure out what'd happened. It was all a terrible mistake. Some jerk was getting a kick out of ringing doorbells and running away. The man'd come up behind us and seen us shoving each other by the door after we'd rung the bell. And he'd decided it was us. Yes, it was all a terrible mistake, but that didn't change anything. Especially as far as Java was concerned. And not so much on account of his ear, as because he hadn't seen Valya after all, and who knows if he'd ever see her again.

I was afraid he'd blame me for all that'd happened: if I'd have rung the bell as he'd asked me to in the very beginning instead of pushing him towards the door nothing would've happened. But Java was noble. He didn't say a word. All he did was brush away his tears. I wanted to cheer him up, but I couldn't think of anything to say. At last I had an idea.

"Boy, if we could ambush the rat who got us into this mess, we'd sock him in the ear so hard he'd forget his own name! His head'd ring for a week! That'd teach him a lesson! Boy, I could murder him."

But this had no affect on Java. I sighed. We walked through the park on top of the cliff, crossed a little bridge and came to the Dniepro movie theatre.

"Hey!" I shouted like a sailor who sights land. "Let's go to the movies! My aunt gave us money for the movies. Come on."

But Java turned away. "I don't want to," he blurted.

"Ah, come on. You don't want everybody to see you looking like this. A couple of hours in the dark'll make your ear go back to normal."

"All right. Come on," Java muttered. He still had his face turned away from me.

I raced over to the box office.

The movie was "The Seven Brave Ones". It was about polar explorers. A blizzard raged on the screen from the beginning to the end. The seven brave explorers, all covered with ice, made brave sounds as they climbed icy hills, fell into snowdrifts and carried their weak comrades. This cheered Java up a bit. By the time we got out the look of hopeless despair was gone from his eyes, though his ear was still swollen.

My stomach felt hollow. I was hungry and hoped we'd go home, but Java wouldn't even hear of it. He was afraid my aunt'd begin asking him questions. Silly him! All he had to do was say he tripped and hit his ear, or that he'd gotten his ear caught in a bus door, or something just as good. So many things could happen to a person in a big city like Kiev. But I couldn't convince him. We started walking again and finally came to Vladimir's Hill, where the ice cream parlor is. Java stopped. He touched his ear gingerly, looked at me out of suffering eyes and said,

"What if I hold something cold to it? Maybe it'll get better. Huh?"

I touched my chest and shrugged. I knew what he was getting at. We'd spent the money my aunt'd given us on the movies, but we still had three rubles. The bill was tucked away in a secret pocket in the lining of my jacket. It'd taken us six months to save up the three rubles, and we were counting on it for something big. We'd agreed not to spend it on anything except

something very special or out of bounds, something my aunt'd never give us money for: a helicopter ride over Kiev, or an X-rated movie. Since Java wasn't as strong-willed as I and could spend the money in no time, we decided I'd keep it, and that we'd only spend it on something we both wanted.

That's what he was hinting at now suggesting we spend some of it on ice cream. I was all for ice cream, but that's not what we'd been saving up for. I could see Java was in terrible pain by the way he kept touching his ear. And his eyes were like the eyes of a puppy when somebody'd stepped on its tail. I sighed and went inside. Java followed me. We sat down at one of the tables and ordered two vanilla ice creams, the cheapest there was on the menu, only a measely thirteen kopecks apiece. It wouldn't ruin us. We ate in silence, licking our spoons and enjoying our treat. Every now and then Java'd hold the cold spoon to his ear. But what's one little dish of ice cream? Three minutes later we were looking at the metal cups that we'd licked clean and that reflected our drooping faces like two mirrors. Java touched his ear sadly. His ear demanded new sacrifices. I licked my sticky lips and with a pang of desperate courage, like diving into a river from a bridge, I ordered two more dishes of ice cream.

The ice cream they sell in Kiev is really something!

If you think Java's ear stopped hurting after those double scoops, you're mistaken. After that we had chocolate ice cream, and strawberry ice cream, and almond ice cream. And as a side dish to go with each portion we had a glass of soda pop. Java's ear cost us quite a lot. Our money was melting away. I nearly cried when the time came to settle the bill. All that was left was a handful of coins.

We were tottering by the time we left the ice cream parlour.

We sat on a bench outside for about half an hour in a blissful stupor. If only we could have ice cream dinners every day! And ice cream breakfast! And ice cream suppers!

After a while Java looked off to the left and said, "What d'you think that is over there?"

"The Ferris wheel."

"Then why're we sitting here?"

"Let's go."

"What about money?"

"We've got enough for a ride."

I was ready to spend our last kopeck on the Ferris wheel, because it was something that was very important to me. After all, I was going to be a pilot.

We were just in time. There was only one vacant car left. The minute we got in the wheel began to turn. Wow! Golly! We were rising higher and higher, and higher, and it gave me a sinking feeling. Then we began dropping lower and lower, and lower, and that gave me a rising feeling! Just like in a plane! When we were going up we were gaining altitude. When we were going down it was like coming in for landing. (I'd been up in a plane once. It was a plane that sprayed the fields.)

The Ferris wheel was built on the high bank of the Dnieper. You could see so far when you were up in it, it was like being in an airplane. The Podol, the Dnieper and the broad Left Bank which stretched off as far as the horizon were all below us. And there was Trukhanov Island and the beach. Boy, was it crowded! You couldn't even see the sand. It's a wonder all those people didn't crush each other. Now what was that over there behind the trees? Gee! It was – a parachute jump! A real parachute jump! If only I could jump from it! I just had

to. Why, parachute jumping to a pilot is like swimming to a sailor.

"Java! See the parachute jump? Let's go!"

"Sure. Let's." Java's not going to be a pilot when he grows up, but he's always ready to jump from anything or do anything that's dangerous.

Chapter 4

THE BEACH. THE PARACHUTE JUMP. THE DROWNED MAN. THE STRANGER FROM APT. 13

We were running down the stairs that led from the amusement park to the embankment. It was a nice stairway, except that it was so long you felt out of breath even when you were running down.

"Why're we running? What's the mad rush?" I said out loud, but to myself I said: "I've got to save my strength for the jump. You never can tell. It's my first jump."

We slowed down to a walk. Below we could see something that was either a gate or an arbor with a huge column on top and something else on top of that.

"Wait," Java said. "There's something written on it." He likes to read historical and memorial plaques.

There was a little marble plaque on the wall. It read:

TO COMMEMORATE KIEV'S RECEIVING
MAGDEBURG RIGHTS

Erected in 1802
A. I. MELENSKY,
architect

I'd never've thought that this was a monument! A monument is usually a man on a horse, or a man without a horse, but always some great hero, a general or a genius. But this was something called "Magdeburg rights". What d'you know!

Those weren't the only words on the plaque. There were a lot of others besides. All the others were hand-written and added on much later. "Magdeburg rights" was all filled in with things like: "Kolya loves Olya", "Vasya loves Tasya", "Yura loves Nyura", etc.

You could see that none of them were good at penmanship, because all the writing was wobbly and crooked. And another thing. Maybe they did love each other, but they sure as anything didn't love anybody else, not with messing up the monument like that.

"Is that what they learned to write for?" Java sounded mad.

"My, aren't you a good boy! Don't you remember the time you wrote all those slogans on the barn in back of the schoolhouse, calling for the downfall of our assistant principal Savva Kononovich?" I said to myself. But I didn't say it out loud, because I'd written all kinds of silly things on fences, too. I could see how awful it was now and swore I'd never do it again.

Feeling quite superior, we headed for the pedestrian bridge that would take us to Trukhanov Island. People were streaming across the bridge. They must've all been crazy, because there wasn't a single grain of sand to be seen under all those people on the beach. I just knew somebody'd be crushed to death. I was sure there'd be casualties.

Casualties... The closer we got to the parachute jump the harder something slimy and cold began clutching at my heart, something really icky. That jump sure was high. This was no willow tree like the one we dived from back home. What if the parachute didn't open? *Scrunch*! And that'd be the end of us. I was wondering whether there'd been times when the parachute didn't open. Were there ever accidents? And casualties?

We crossed the bridge and turned left to the jump. I was wondering what Java was thinking about. He was walking along briskly. He looked too cheerful. Serious people don't walk like that when they're on their way to take their first parachute jump.

I looked up at the top of the tower. I couldn't see anybody getting ready to jump. Maybe there'd already been a casualty today, and here we were, two stupid fools, in a hurry to be next.

Smart people played ping-pong. That was a good game. You'd never lose your life playing ping-pong. We passed twenty tables where white little balls were flying back and forth like bubbles in the rain.

Here was the tower. How strange. There wasn't a parachute in sight. The rope it was supposed to hang by was tossed over a high beam. A man dressed only in canvas slacks was sitting under a nearby tree. Since he wasn't wearing swimming trunks, I decided he was in charge of something.

I walked over and said, "Can you please tell me if the parachute jump is open?"

He looked at me and grinned "Sure it is. Why not? 'Cept that there's no parachute. They say someone stole it. It's dangerous to jump without a parachute, but you can try if you want to, boys. I see you're both brave fellows, so you don't really need a parachute."

He was teasing us. The parachute jump was closed down, that's what. Hooray!

"Too bad," I said.

There was a swing ride close by. The swings on chains were attached to a big wheel set on top of a high iron post. "How about it?" I said to Java.

"Sure."

We scraped up enough money for the ride, paid for our tickets and each took a swing. We were off, turning slowly at first and then faster and faster.

"H-e-e-y!" I shouted. I felt just like a bird in the air. There was nothing to hold me down on the ground. Ohhh!

"*Rrrrr*!" that was me trying to sound like a motor, imagining I was flying a plane. "*Rat-tat-tat-tat*!" I yelled, training my machine-gun on Java.

He turned towards me and shouted: "*Rat-tat-tat-tat*!"

"I'm going to ram you!" I yelled and swung around towards him, kicking the swing seat from behind and making him fly off in an arc. When he swung back he kicked the seat of my swing, sending me off to a side. *Wheee*! What a ride! And there weren't any accidents! And no casualties. The chains were strong enough to support an elephant. I felt like spinning around and around forever. But suddenly we began slowing down. We were moving slower and slower, and then stopped.

"That's all. Everybody out!"

"Is that all?"

"Buy another ticket and take another ride," the attendant said.

We would have gladly done that, but where could we get the money for tickets if it was in our stomachs? Why'd we have all that ice cream? We could've easily done without the last three portions. Then we would've had the money for the swings. But now, on account of that stupid ice cream, I had to lose out on something that was just made to order for a pilot. It was a real piloty ride. What a dope I was. Sure, Java's ear hurt and he needed something cold, but what about me? Why did I go along? I could've saved my half of the money. He could've had ice cream. There was plenty of ice cream back home, but who

knows when they'd build rides like this in Vasukovka? I'd be a grown man by then. Java saw how I felt.

"Come on. At least we can go for a swim," he said.

"You think I came to Kiev to go swimming? I can swim all I want back home. And where'll we go? We'll get lost in this crowd just as easy as in the woods. We won't ever reach the water. Can't you see there's no water left by the bank? There's nothing but people."

I only said that to let off steam. Only a nut would stay out of the water if he'd got as far as the beach in Kiev. Especially on such a hot day. So we began picking our way over to the water.

I can't imagine what a million people look like, but if I try to I guess I'd think of the beach in Kiev. There must've been at least a million people there. If you don't believe me, go see for yourself.

The place looked like a great big bazaar where everyone was nearly naked and nobody was selling anything. I'd never seen so many nearly naked people before. A million of them! I couldn't believe my eyes.

Those people who thought up the hellfires in ancient times had no imagination at all. What they thought up wasn't any hellfires. If you want to know what the hellfires are really like, just go to the beach in Kiev on a Sunday. That's where you'll see people roasting in the sun. Half of them're lying flat on their backs with their eyes closed. You might think they're already dead, but then you notice that their stomachs're going up and down a bit, so that means they're still alive and breathing. That's the only way you can tell. The other half is eating, eating all the time: chewing, swallowing, chomping and drinking milk from paper cartons and beer and soda pop from bottles.

It makes you think this other half's come to the beach to eat and drink. Only a fraction of all those people were splashing around in the water, but even this was enough for their bodies to force out half of the water in the Dnieper. Another group was forever on the go, heading someplace, stepping over bodies and trodding on people's hands, feet, heads and other parts. This group of people was enough to make you think you were watching a crush at a railroad station. And there, *whack, whack, whack*, people were playing a kind of volleyball under the trees. They were standing around in a circle, volleying a ball back and forth, hitting it as hard as they could, trying to bounce it off the sunbathers' heads. The coloured balls kept rolling across the sand and over the people lying there more often than they were in the air. That's what beach volleyball is like. And there were the muscle men parading around, flexing their muscles, thrusting out their chests. Each one had a check-room tag on a rubber band around his wrist, as if they'd all been numbered.

"Hello, Garik!"

"Hey, Shurik!"

"*Ciao*, Marik!"

That was the muscle men greeting each other. They didn't bother to stop or turn their heads when they greeted each other so's not to spoil their athletic postures. And all those strutting, numbered Mariks, Gariks and Shuriks were tattooed all over. They had tattoos on their arms, chests, legs and backs. You can't imagine the pictures on them! There were sailing ships, eagles, lions, women, daggers and all sorts of wise sayings like: "Infidelity brings death" and such like. That was in the first place. In the second place, each of them had something hanging around his neck. They wore chains, charms, keys and crosses. It was strange to see a cross lying on a tattooed sailing ship,

a dagger or "Infidelity brings death". You could see the cross wasn't something religious, it was just a fad.

We saw a strange-looking man who had nothing but skin on his head and thick reddish hair, just like a bear's, where everybody else has skin. He was lying in the sun, getting a tan. He sure was stupid. How could he get a tan if the sun couldn't reach his skin through all that fur?

Then we saw a funny old man. He popped out of the water and began doing sitting-up excercises, and then hopped around like a kid. He was skinny and bald on top, with long hair down to his shoulders all around the rest of his head. He kept grinning and winking. That was some old man! And there was a gray-haired, wrinkled old lady playing badminton. She sure swung a mean racket. Boy! I'd like to see old Granny Trindichka back home try to wave a racket around like that. The whole village'd come running to watch her. But here nobody paid any attention to the old lady.

The old people in Kiev aren't at all like the ones back home. They're all like kids. Like *old* kids. And the young people were like old people, and some even had beards.

There was a lady wrapped up in a blanket snoring away under a tree. Why'd she come to the beach? It's much more comfortable to sleep in your own bed.

And there were so many children! All you heard was parents shouting:

"Get out of the water, Roman! Get out this minute!"

"Don't go so far, Vera! Turn back!"

"Where are your sandals, Sasha? Don't you hear me?"

"Take off your wet trunks, Alik."

"Give him the ball, Tolya! It's his ball."

"You're not going into the water again, Yasha! You're being punished. No more swimming."

"Did you put sand in my shoes, Fanya? Pour it out this minute!"

"Just have an egg, dear. Just one egg," a fat lady in a striped bathing suit was saying to a big, chunky boy of about twelve. She was holding out a shelled, hard-boiled egg. He made a face. "Come, darling. Please?" she cooed.

A little boy of about six began chirping: "Mama! I'm in the water! Mama! I'm in the Dnieper! Mama! I'm swimming!" You'd think he'd never seen any water before.

We went down to the very edge and began hunting for a place to leave our things. I looked at the river. It was swarming with people. "What if somebody was drowning and we saved him?" I said to myself. "I'd rather it was a kid. They're easier to save."

It was a long-standing dream of ours. We'd save somebody and become famous. It would be great if we could save somebody here, with hundreds of people watching us. What if that chirping little boy suddenly went under? We'd pull him out in a flash. The next day the papers'd carry a piece headed: "Two Brave Boys From Vasukovka".

"I had a call from the paper yesterday..." I suddenly heard someone saying. I started: had somebody tuned in on my thoughts?

No, it was two men talking. One was short and round-faced. He was standing in the water. The other was broad-shouldered and had a hooked nose. He was standing at the water's edge and was completely dressed (maybe he was on his way home), but he was barefoot and was holding his shoes.

"He wanted to know about my new role. I play a tsar," the round-faced man continued. "But I said it was too early to speak of it yet and that he could come to rehearsals later on."

"That's right," the other man said. "Never let them see anything that's half-done. That's no way to do things. Well, good luck. I've got to run or I'll be late for the broadcast. Give my regards to Galinka. I'll drop in one of these days. I remember the house. It's apartment thirteen, isn't it?"

"Yes. We'll be looking forward to seeing you. So long," the round-faced man said with a smile. He turned, walked farther into the water and was about to swim off when he suddenly stopped and raised his hand. "Ah, I forgot to take off my watch!" He turned around, saw us and said, "Hey, boys! Do me a favor, put my watch on those gray pants, will you?" He held out his watch.

I was closer to him than Java, so I took the watch. The man turned around, dived into the water and swam off. He was doing the crawl, and his feet were working so fast he looked like a motorboat. He was a good swimmer. We were still watching him when we heard someone yell:

"He's drowned! Drowned! The man's drowned!"

"Where?" We spun around and raced after a crowd of running people. And why not? If someone'd shouted that and you'd've heard him, would you have stood still? Besides, I'd just been dreaming about saving someone. And I'd never seen a real live drowned man before. I mean, not a live one, but—well, anyway, a drowned man.

"Where? Where is he?" we shouted, darting among the people, trying to get a look.

But the crowd was standing close together. We couldn't see him. We dropped to our hands and knees and crawled through dozens of legs like puppies! At last we saw him. A huge, bulging man was stretched out on the sand. Sitting on top of him was a skinny, sharp-nosed, middle-aged man with a brush of

gray hair on his chest. He was applying artificial respiration. One! Two! One! Two!

"I'll relieve you," the muscular, tanned lifeguard said. He'd just rowed up in his lifeboat and looked very embarrassed, probably because such a puny little man and not he, whose job it was, had rescued the drowned man.

We had a good look at the drowned man. We could tell he was one of those body-building muscle men, because there was a horseshoe charm on a chain around his neck and a tattoo on his arm. It was a heart pierced by an arrow. Under that were the words: "I'm looking for you, Luck."

The sharp-nosed man and the lifeguard had already relieved each other twice, but the drowned man wasn't coming to. People in the crowd were saying:

"He's so young.–"

"What a tragedy!"

"How did it happen?"

"They say he swam out too far and had cramps or something."

"The Dnieper carries off so many lives!"

All of a sudden the drowned man opened his eyes. A murmur went through the crowd. The man raised his head, looked around blearily and leaned on his elbow. The sharp-nosed man who was sitting on him applying artificial respiration, drew in his breath, made a face and said,

"Why, he's drunk!"

The lifeguard leaned over the drowned man and said, "You're right! He's dead drunk!"

"What the hell!"

"For shame!"

"Going swimming when he's stoned."

"Drinking in this heat's enough to kill anyone!"

"Who said cramps?"

That's what the crowd was saying. The sharp-nosed man stared hard at the revived drunk and then raised his hand and slapped him hard, first on one cheek and then on the other.

"Good for you!"

"Serves him right!"

"That'll teach him a lesson!"

"We thought it was an accident, but he..."

"Slap him again!"

"Go on!"

The crowd's mood had changed. The tension was gone. The sharp-nosed man got up quickly, stepped over the "drowned man" and strode off. The crowd parted to let him through.

"You could've at least said thank you to the man who pulled you out!" the lifeguard snapped.

"You should've asked him his name!"

"You think it was easy towing a hunk like you in?" people were shouting at the drunk, but he just blinked at them stupidly. He still hadn't come to completely. The lifeguard rowed off and the crowd melted away.

"Oh! I forgot about the watch!" I said suddenly, seeing that I was still holding it. We ran back. Where were those gray pants? They were gone. Maybe they were over there? No. Where were they? Where was the man? There were hundreds of people all around us, but all of them were strangers. It must be someplace farther on. No. We must've passed the place. Or did we? Java said we'd passed it. Maybe we hadn't reached it yet. We kept running around in circles, but couldn't find the gray pants or the actor. How could we, if there was nothing but sand and half-naked people all around, and no clues to go by?

Oh, why'd that drunk have to get rescued just then? What were we to do?

"Look for him in the water, Java! Maybe he's still swimming."

Java stripped down to his trunks and dived in. I stood on the bank. I was afraid to move away from the spot so's not to lose sight of him, but meanwhile I kept looking into the faces of the people all around me, just in case. Half an hour later Java stumbled out of the water.

"He's not there," he panted.

"Maybe he drowned?"

"What about his pants? They're gone. He didn't have them on in the water. And a swimmer like him can cross the ocean and never drown."

"What'll we do?"

"How do I know?"

I was so upset I didn't know what to do. The man'd asked me to do him a favour. Instead, I'd gone off with his watch. "He'll think I stole it," I said miserably.

Java shrugged.

I'd never felt so awful in my life. Sure, there'd been times when we'd done things we shouldn't have. We'd shaken pears off the wild pear tree in Knysh's yard, but there were so many pears on it they rotted in the grass anyway. And Knysh's wife was so stingy and mean that everybody hated her. Actually, we shook them down more to get even with her than because we liked those bitter little pears.

Once when I was little I swiped a poppyseed bun when I was staying at my aunt's house. But I'd swiped it from my own aunt, and it was only a little bun. Now here I was, holding a stranger's expensive watch. How could we ever fight crime and catch thieves when we were thieves ourselves?

I wanted to stand up and shout loud enough for everyone on the beach to hear: "Where's a militiaman? Take me in! I'm a thief! I stole a man's watch! He trusted me. Arrest me!"

But I didn't stand up, and I didn't shout, because, luckily, there wasn't a single militiaman in sight. Maybe there was, but he was wearing trunks, and how could you recognize a militiaman if he was half-naked? And anyway, a half-naked militiaman wasn't a militiaman. He didn't make you feel small.

Now you take Valigura, our village militiaman, for instance. Burmilo, the local drunk, won't pay any attention to Valigura if he's out of uniform. When Valigura's working in his garden in his old clothes and somebody calls him to make Burmilo cool off, Valigura never goes after him in his old clothes. Burmilo won't even look his way if he does. He'll say, "Who're you? I never saw you before! Get going!" But as soon as Valigura puts on his uniform and cap Burmilo becomes as meek as a lamb and says, "Pardon me, Chief," and trots off home to bed.

A half-naked militiaman's no militiaman at all. That's for sure.

"We'll never find that actor here," Java said.

"What do we do, go to the militia station?" I said, feeling icy fingers on my heart.

"Oh, sure. They'd love to see us. Run along. And say hello to the militiaman we knocked over on the escalator while you're at it."

"What'll we do?"

"How'd we get here? Over the bridge. How's everybody going home? Over the bridge. There's no other way. Let's go to the bridge and wait for him there. Maybe we'll spot him. Or maybe he'll spot us. He's still here someplace. He's got to be. He can't leave without his watch."

"Maybe Java's right," I said to myself. "We've more of a chance of finding him if we wait by the bridge than if we race around in circles here."

We sat on the railings: Java on the right side and I on the left. We sat there, waiting. The sun would soon be setting. People were beginning to leave the beach in droves. It made me dizzy to keep scanning all those faces. We'd never spot him in this crowd. Our only hope was that he'd see us.

I must have looked miserable, because a woman suddenly stopped beside me, said: "Poor child" and pressed a coin into my hand. I nearly toppled over. She thought I was a beggar! When I came to she was gone. That's how low I'd fallen! Luckily, there was such a crowd between us that Java hadn't seen her. I slid off the rail and leaned against it, with my hands behind me, so nobody else'd get the idea I was begging.

It was dark by now, and the crowd was down to a trickle. Still, we hadn't found the actor. My stomach was rumbling. We'd had nothing to eat except ice cream. Java came over and said,

"Boy, are we dopes! What're we standing here for? He's an actor, isn't he? We'll make the rounds of the theatres tomorrow and find him. We know he plays a tsar."

Why hadn't I thought of it? Java sure is smart. He has a good head on his shoulders. That was what we'd do. There were only about five or six theatres in Kiev, so we'd find him soon enough, return the watch and tell him what'd happened, including the part about the drunk who'd drowned, and everything else.

Life really is beautiful when you find a way out of a hopeless mess.

"Let's have a look at the watch," Java said.

We went over to a street light (the lights were on by then)

and had a good look at it. It was round and as slim as a five-kopeck piece. The dial was black, and there were tiny gold bars instead of numerals. The hands were also gold. We'd never seen such a fine watch before.

"Try it on," said Java.

"I don't want to."

"Go on! You might as well try it on and wear it for a while, since you sort of stole it anyway. You won't have a chance tomorrow."

"I don't want to wear somebody else's watch."

"Let me wear it if you're that proud, 'cause I'm not," he said, took the watch and put it on. All of a sudden Java looked about five years older. His face became very stern and serious. He walked along, holding his arm out stiffly, glancing at the watch all the time and feeling very important. He'd bend his elbow every so often and bring the watch up to his face to see what time it was. Java paid no attention to me. He didn't say a word. You'd think I wasn't there at all. That's when I began feeling sorry I hadn't put it on first. After all, you might say it was mine. And I'd been the one who'd suffered on account of it. Now here was Java, wearing it and looking snooty besides.

When we came to the end of the embankment and Paton Bridge I'd reached the end of my rope. "That's enough! Take it off!" I said. "I don't want you to break it. I'll have to pay for it if you do."

Java sighed, took it off and immediately became five years younger, a kid like he was before he put it on.

The minute the watch was back in my pocket I felt relieved. "Oh, I forgot to tell you, a lady on the bridge gave me three kopecks."

"She did?" Java sounded happy. "Then why're we walking? Let's take the trolley. I'm pooped."

"That's called alms, stupid! Nobody uses alms for carfare. She gave me the money because she thought I was a beggar."

"What're you going to do with it?"

"I told you, I don't know."

What a crazy situation: I could never spend the money, but then again, you don't just throw money out. We thought and thought, and finally decided we'd give the coin to a real beggar as soon as we saw one. (But since we never did, I still have it.)

"You know, this is just like a real detective story," Java said excitedly. "We know he lives in apt. 13. That's a very important clue."

"It sure is. How many apartments d'you think there are in Kiev with that number? We'll get old and die before we get to every one."

"So what? It's still a real adventure," Java insisted. "It's like tracking down a robber. Only this is the other way around. Understand? The crooks're tracking down the victim so they can return what they stole. How about that?"

"I'll tell you how about that. What d'you think my aunt's going to say when we finally show up? She's probably out of her mind worrying."

My aunt didn't say a word. She was lying on the couch with a cold compress on her head. But my uncle had a few words to say to us. This is what he said:

"If you were my sons I'd paddle you so hard you wouldn't be able to put your pants on tomorrow. But since I've no right to lay a hand on you, I'll tell you outright: if this ever happens again, I'm buying you two tickets on the first train back to Vasukovka. I don't want you to make me a widower. Your aunt nearly had a heart attack. Look at her. She can't even raise her head."

We stood there looking at the floor, mumbling excuses, saying we'd gone to the movies, and then had a ride on the Ferris wheel, and then went to see a girl we knew (her name was Valya Malinovskaya, honest, here was her address, you could go and see for yourself), and we even had dinner at her house, and then we all watched TV, and they kept asking us to stay a while longer, and, honest, we'd never do it again!

Then we each had a glass of tea ("We had a *huge* dinner at Valya's house") and went to bed feeling famished. We lay there, but couldn't fall asleep. I was suddenly awfully ashamed of myself. My conscience was killing me.

"Look at what's happened!" I whispered to Java. "We wanted to do something big and brave, but all we seem to do is lie and cheat. And all of it in just one day! We robbed the actor, even if it was an accident, we tripped up the militiaman, we wasted three rubles, we lied to my aunt, we lied to my uncle, and – We were even given alms. You mean we've got to keep on lying and acting like that if we want to become heroes? Well, that's a lousy kind of heroism. Real heroes are honest men like Karmeliuk, Dovbush, the Count of Monte Cristo, Captain Nemo, Katigoroshko and Pokryshkin. They never lied. We're just a couple of liars and crooks."

Java sighed to show me that he agreed. "I know," he said, "It's no good. Let's not lie anymore."

"Right. But we've got to think of something that'll make us keep our promise. Let's swear an oath (and sign it in blood), never to lie again. If you can't tell the truth, or don't want to, then don't say anything. No matter how they keep at you, don't say a word."

"All right. But we've already sworn an oath and signed it in blood, and it didn't change anything. I know! If one of us lies, then ... then the other one socks him three times. Right away,

no matter where we are: out on the street, in class, or even up on the stage. And the one who lied has no right to put up a fight or duck. By no means. You get three socks for the first lie, six for the second, twelve for the third, and so on. Golly! It'll help us improve our will-power, and that's something we'll need a lot of, if you ever want to be a hero."

Java always has to think up something special. I had a feeling he wasn't all that keen on getting cured of lying by being socked. He just wanted it to be done in some special way. I didn't argue. All I cared about was having it work. And so it was settled. Now, since we were nearly one hundred per cent honest, we dropped off to sleep without a care in the world.

Chapter 5

WE SEARCH FOR THE UNKNOWN TSAR FROM ART. 13. THE MEETING IN THE THEATRE. THE RISE AND FALL OF JAVA REN

The morning began with a surprise. When I awoke I saw that Java was already dressed. While I was dressing he winked at me and tossed his head, as if to say: come on, I want to tell you something in secret.

I followed him into the bathroom. He looked at me suspiciously and whispered:

"Why didn't you say your uncle was a Counter-intelligence man?" And he raised his fist to start socking me.

I was so surprised I could hardly say, "What counter-intelligence?"

"The one that catches spies."

"If you ask me, you're spy-crazy."

"I am not. You think I'm a dope? Pistols are only issued to militiamen, border guards, and Counter-intelligence men. That's a fact. And since your uncle isn't a militiaman or a border guard, it means he's a Counter-intelligence man."

"What pistol?"

"A real one."

"How d'you know?"

"It's in his desk, in the drawer that's open a bit. I saw it."

"You did? Show me!" Now I curled my fingers into a fist. "You'll be sorry if you're lying."

We left the bathroom and strolled through the apartment as if there was nothing on our minds. Then we made a beeline for the desk, our eyes darting to the open drawer. It was no lie. I saw the pistol. The gunmetal glinted. My heart skipped

a beat. I glanced quickly at my uncle, who was doing calisthenics on the balcony. I waited a few moments and said,

"Uncle Grisha! What's this?"

"What's what?" he said, coming into the room.

"Here, in the drawer."

"A pistol."

"What's it for?"

"Why, it's a starter's pistol. Didn't you ever see a judge shoot one off at a track meet?"

Golly! How could I've been so dumb? I'd completely forgotten that in his spare time Uncle Grisha was a judge (he was a Master of Sports in track-and-field). I should've guessed what kind of a pistol it was. Actually, though, I'd never seen any kind of pistol close-up. Neither had Java. He was getting red in the face for having made such a stupid mistake, so to hide his embarrassment he said,

"How does it work?"

"I'll show you." Uncle Crisha picked up the pistol. "First, there's the command: 'Get ready!' Then: 'Get set!' And then–" he raised the pistol.

Bang! The explosion was deafening. At that very moment

someone screamed. There was a crash and a thud in the kitchen. We dashed in to see what had happened. My aunt was sitting on the floor. Lying beside her was a smashed china mortar. She'd been crushing poppy seeds for a poppy-seed cake and had been so frightened by the shot that she'd jumped, skidded and sat down in a heap. She looked so funny we couldn't help laughing.

"Gri-sha!" she moaned, tilting her head. "What a baby you are! How could you? I nearly died."

"I'm not to blame if you're as timid as a mouse," he said. He was still smiling as he helped her up.

"It sure did bang. It's enough to scare the daylights out of anyone," I said, feeling sorry for my aunt.

"It's a swell gun for catching spies," Java said. "It sounds just like a real one."

"Can I shoot it, Uncle Grisha?"

"I guess so. But–" he looked at my aunt.

"We can fire it in the bedroom," Java said quickly.

"All right."

But before I did I shouted, "Get ready, Auntie! Get set!" Then only did I pull the trigger with both index fingers (it was too stiff to do it with just one). Boy, did

it ever bang! It sounded louder than when my uncle'd fired it. Java and I each had two turns. My uncle wouldn't let us fire it any more. He said we'd have the neighbours breaking down the door if we did.

Shooting the pistol distracted me a bit, but when I thought of the watch again I began to feel awful. How would it all end? Would we find the actor? And what would he say?

I ate my breakfast in silence, feeling very depressed. Java kept glancing at me and winking to cheer me up. I chewed my bacon and eggs unhappily, wondering how we'd manage to slip out of the house to hunt for the actor and still not tell any lies (by no means!).

But why lie? One of the things on our list of things to do was going to see a play at the Children's Theatre. We'd go today instead of putting it off, and on the way we'd stop off at all the other theatres and look for the actor. The matinee began at noon. It was only nine now, so we had plenty of time.

My aunt and uncle didn't object to our going to a matinee, but my uncle said, "What if I join you? How about it?"

We didn't want him to come along at all. That'd ruin all our plans, so I hurried to say,

"You'll be awfully bored. It's kid stuff. If I was grown up–"

I don't know whether he guessed my thoughts or not, but he smiled and said, "You're probably right, Pavlik. Run along. I was only joking. But I'll send you home tomorrow if you get lost again!"

He gave us some pocket money. We put on our new starched shirts, pressed pants and shiny new shoes, and were off.

I don't know about other people, but when I'm wearing new clothes I feel like I'm naked. I think everybody's looking at me, and I'm so embarrassed I want to hide. I end up by rubbing my sleeve on a wall so my shirt won't look so new, or getting a spot on my pants, or scuffing my shoes. Then I feel better. So the minute the door closed behind us I wiped the dust off the banister with my sleeve and got a nice dirty streak on my shirt.

Still, wearing everything new was very uncomfortable: my feet felt like they were boxed in wooden clogs, my stiff collar rubbed my neck like a grater, and I had to turn my whole body if I wanted to turn my head. Why can't people dress normally when they go to the theatre? The idea was to see the play, not to make a show of ourselves. If I ever get to be somebody important I'll pass a law saying nobody can go to the theatre wearing new clothes. But I'll never be a lawmaker. I'm going to be a pilot.

We took the trolleybus to the Theatre of Musical Comedy first. We'd decided to start there, because I thought a nice-looking, round-faced actor like him just had to be a comedian.

The theatre lobby was deserted. The box office was in the lobby, to the right. Then came two huge doors. We climbed the stairs to the doors. They weren't locked. We looked inside, but there was no one there, either.

"Maybe we're too early?" I said.

"We are not. It's ten o'clock. Actors go to work in the morning just like everybody else. That's their job."

"Then why isn't anybody here?"

"You think they all stand around in the lobby? Nobody's here because they're all onstage, rehearsing. Come on."

Just as we were passing through the doors a woman wearing a blue uniform appeared. She was coming towards us.

"Are you looking for anyone, boys?"

We didn't know what to say and just stood there. Why, we didn't even know his name.

"Are you looking for anyone?" she repeated.

"We're looking for the tsar," Java said.

"The tsar?" Her eyebrows shot up.

"The round-faced one. The bald one," I added.

She smiled. "You've come too late, boys. There's been no tsar for sixty years. You should've come sooner."

"We don't mean the real one," Java said. "We're look-

ing for the actor who plays the tsar. Didn't you understand?"

"He lives in apartment thirteen," I added.

"Ah, I see," she said. "But we've no one like that here. There's no play in our repertory now that has a tsar. Why are you looking for that actor here? Did he say he was in our troupe? What's his name?"

Java and I looked at each other.

"We don't know. All we know is that he plays the tsar," I said.

"Where? In which theatre?"

"We don't know."

"Well! Are you sure you didn't make him up? How d'you know he plays a tsar?"

"He said so."

"So you do know him?"

"Just a little," I said and looked at Java. Why didn't he say anything? He was usually the one to do the talking, but now you'd think he was deaf and dumb.

"How d'you know him if you don't know his name or the theatre he's in?" the woman asked.

"Uh– We didn't have time to ask him."

"Then why're you looking for him?"

"We want to see him. We've got to talk to him."

"About his work in the theatre?" she said and smiled.

"Yep."

No sooner had I said that than– *Pow*! *Pow*! *Pow*! I saw stars. The woman gasped and threw up her hands.

"Why'd you hit him? You ruffian! He gave you no cause..."

I didn't hear the rest of what she was shouting, because by then we were out on the street.

I still felt dizzy, and there were tears in my eyes. So that was why Java hadn't said a word! He was afraid he'd lie, too, and

was waiting to see if I would. But it wasn't really lying. All I'd said was: "Yep" when she'd jokingly asked that last question. You might say I was sort of joking, too, when I answered. There was no law against that. If that's the way you looked at things, you'd be black-and-blue all your life.

"You mad at me? We had an agreement, remember?" Java said innocently. "Nobody's to blame."

I said nothing.

"You've no right to be mad. That's not fair. Why'd we make the pact then?"

Here he was, lecturing me after what he'd done! Sure, it was stupid to be mad at him. We did have a pact, but when you get conked on the head with others looking at you and you've no right to hit back it's not something that'll make you feel like laughing or singing.

"Come on," Java said. "If I lie, you'll sock me, and I won't even bat an eye. You'll see."

He was right. Still, I was silent all the way to the Opera. When we reached the square in front of the building I rubbed my forehead and finally said,

"We've got to do it differently. We've got to begin by finding out about the what's-it-called – the repertory. We can't just say: 'Where's the tsar?' Not when they're not even putting on a play about a tsar."

"Right," Java said quickly. He was relieved now that I'd started talking again. We decided we'd tell the truth. We'd say we had to return something an actor'd given us for safekeeping while he was in swimming. (We just wouldn't say what it was. It was too awful to confess it was a watch.)

We had more luck with the tsars at the Opera than at the Theatre of Musical Comedy. We read the playbills and saw there was a tsar in "Boris Godunov", one in "The Tale of Tsar Saltan", one in "The Decembrists" and one in "The Snow Maiden". I was positive we'd find the bald, round-faced actor among all those tsars, but none of them were the one we

wanted. They were all the wrong kind of tsars. Not a single one was bald. Besides, they were all tall and broad-shouldered. The ticket taker showed us where photographs of the troupe's actors and actresses lined the walls in the lobby. Our man wasn't there. We trudged out of the Opera unhappily.

"Never mind," said Java. He was trying to sound cheerful. "I knew we wouldn't find him here. Opera singers're afraid to catch cold and ruin their voices. They'll never go splashing around in a river. Only real actors go swimming."

Our next stop was the Russian Drama Theatre, but there were no tsars in the cast there or at the Ivan Franko Theatre, either. Now all that was left was the Children's Theatre. As we walked up the street, we passed a strange-looking house covered with stone sculptures of elephants, snakes, weird birds and monsters. If this was any other day I'd have stood there gaping, because I was positive there wasn't another house like it anyplace, but now I just walked by. My heart was a black pit. If all those monsters had suddenly come to life and had looked into it, they'd have gotten scared.

"Don't worry," Java said. "He's got to be at the Children's Theatre. Just you wait. He's probably the tsar in some fairy-tale. He's a comedian. I think we saw him on TV. Remember the guy who tripped at the door and went sprawling? Ha-ha-ha!" He was trying to cheer me up, thinking up all sorts of funny things on the way, but it was no use.

When we finally got to the theatre it was just like being back in school during recess. Kids were running around, shoving, laughing and screaming. The kids were so young you could see they were still in primary school. We went up to the box office. Sure enough, it was a fairy-tale, a matinee for tots.

"There's no tsar in this," I said.

"Not in 'Little Red Riding Hood'," said Java.

We both made a face, but we couldn't turn around and go home, because we had to see the pictures of the actors inside.

"I guess we'll have to see 'Little Red Riding Hood'," Java said.

We bought two tickets and went in, making our way through the crowds of small fry to get a closer look at the photographs. We went up to each one in turn, hoping against hope. This was the last theatre. This was our last chance. After we'd inspected every single photograph I lost all hope. The man we were looking for wasn't there. Noplace. What were we to do? Where could we find him? That meant he wasn't an actor after all. But we'd heard him say he was. And we'd heard him say he'd been given the role of a tsar. How come?

"Don't worry yet," Java said. "Maybe his picture's missing. Remember the time Misha Gonobobel didn't get his picture on the Honour Roll Board, because when everybody had their pictures taken a bee stung him, and his face swelled up like a balloon? Maybe the same thing happened to the actor."

"Oh, sure." I knew it couldn't've happened, but who could tell?

"Hello, boys!" somebody said. We turned around. There was Valya. She had on a white dress and was wearing a big white bow in her hair. Holding her hand was a little first-grader wearing his school uniform. "I recognized you right away," Valya was saying. "Have you been in Kiev long? Are you here on a class excursion, or on your own?"

I said nothing. She was his friend, so he could do the talking. But Java didn't say anything, either. I wish you could've seen him. First he turned pale, then he turned red, then he turned pale again. And then his face became all covered with red splotches. He hadn't looked this bad ever, not even when he'd fallen down into the old well the year before.

Valya kept on chattering. "Will you be here long? Did you catch those poachers? You promised to write. Did you lose my address? Did you? Why don't you say anything? Don't you want to talk to me?"

At last Java forced his mouth open. What he said was, "Why– Of course– We–"

It wasn't much of a speech, but I didn't interrupt. I was giving them a chance to talk. It was too late to interrupt them anyway, because the third bell for the performance had rung, and everybody was in a hurry to get to their seats. The curtain went up. We were in Row 7, and Valya was in Row 9. Instead of looking at the stage, Java kept squirming in his seat, twisting his neck to look at Valya.

"You'll end up with your chin on your back for good, and you'll have to walk backwards," I said.

He paid no attention. Meanwhile, things'd been progressing, and by now the Big Bad Wolf was making his way into Grandma's cottage so's to eat her up. That quick-witted granny was putting on a good show: building a barricade of furniture, scampering around the stage, tossing pots, pans, pitchers and other household utensils at the Big Bad Wolf.

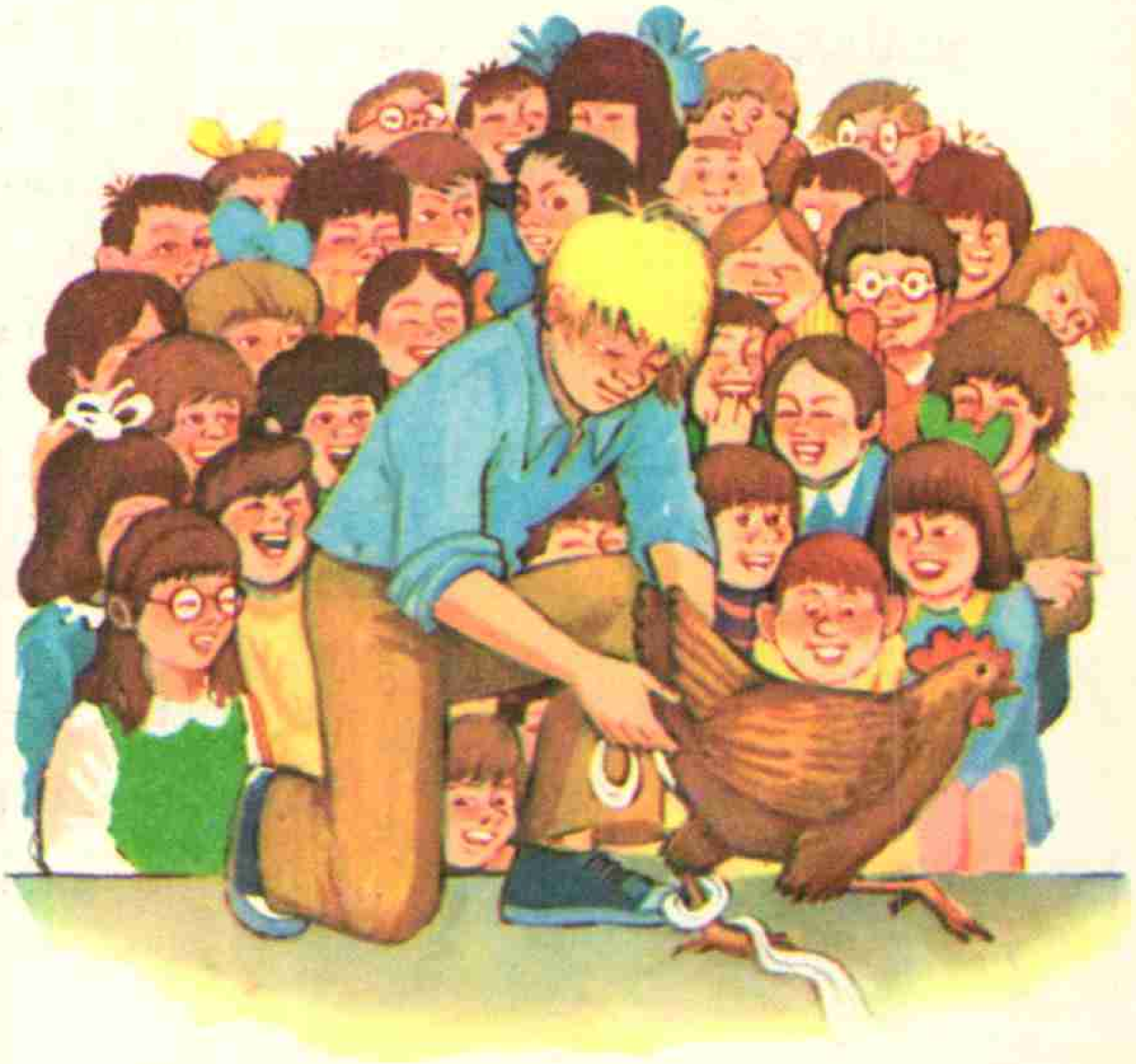
A real, live hen was tied to the fence outside Grandma's cottage. During the fast action on stage the hen got all tangled up and began thrashing about and flapping its wings. The Big Bad Wolf and Grandma were so busy running around they didn't notice what had happened, but the audience was watching the poor hen and worrying. It looked half-dead by then. Still, what could anybody do? You couldn't just jump up and shout, and interrupt the performance, could you?

Java was fidgeting like he had ants in his pants. All of a sudden he stood up and walked down the aisle to the stage. I held my breath. So did everybody else. All heads turned to follow him, like soldiers on parade when a general inspects the troops. He just kept on walking, on and on, then up the steps to the stage on over to the hen. Then he bent down and began

untangling it. Meanwhile, the actors went on with the play, paying no attention to him. Java untangled the hen and came back to his seat as if it were nothing, but when he sat down beside me I could hear him breathing hard, and his heart was pounding. A few minutes later the Big Bad Wolf finally swallowed Grandma, and Act One ended. The curtain fell. The lights went up. Everyone clapped. Since most of the audience'd turned to look at Java, you couldn't tell whether they were applauding the actors or him. Valya came hurrying over.

"Good for you! You sure have a lot of nerve. I'd never have been able to do that. Good for you!" She was speaking very loudly. Too loudly, in fact. She probably wanted everybody to see that she knew Java. She was very proud she knew him. All the kids were looking up to him, and when we went out to the lobby we could hear them saying excitedly: "There he is! That's him! The one in the white shirt."

It was something Java could only have dreamed about. He was in seventh heaven. He was beaming, walking up and down the lobby like he was on stilts and taller than everybody else in



the world. His eyes shone like ordinary people's eyes never shine. I felt there was a great big distance between us. What did he care about me and my worrying over the watch now? Sure, he was a hero. It hurt me to look at him.

"This is my brother Mikola," Valya said, because Java kept looking at the little boy who was hanging around us. Her kid brother turned red, just like he was being introduced to a famous cosmonaut, or movie star, or some other famous person.

"The only reason I'm here is because of him. Mama won't let him go out alone yet," Valya said, and she sounded like she was apologizing.

Java sized up her kid brother condescendingly. That made Mikola turn still redder.

"Well? Did you catch them or not?" Valya said.

"Sure we did," Java said.

"And you didn't write to tell me? Some friends you are! Did you lose my address?"

"No, but..." Java shrugged, and his shrug was meant to mean: "what's all this about writing anyway?"

Now Valya blushed, but she went on anyway, "Well, I'm sure some grown-ups helped you catch them. Or else, you helped the grown-ups."

"Well, in fact, we trapped him ourselves," Java said snootily, glanced at me quickly and bit his lip. It was too late.

I took a deep breath, raised my fist and conked him on the head three times. Valya cried out. Her kid brother Mikola giggled. Somebody nearby laughed. The stilts broke, and Java came crashing down to earth. He was stunned. He was as red as a beet. And his eyes looked wild. I even felt sorry for him, but it wasn't my fault. He shoudn't've invented the punishment. When Valya (kind soul that she was) saw that Java wasn't going to put up a fight, she shouted at me, "Are you nuts? What d'you think you're doing?"

There was a crowd of little kids around us by then, and Java's eyes began darting back and forth like a cornered ani-

mal's. He managed a pitiful sort of a smile (like the kind when you're up in somebody else's pear tree and that somebody else comes along and sees you there) and said,

"Never mind. It's all right. Now we're quits." Then he turned to the crowd of little kids and said, "What're you staring at? The show's over."

The tots drifted off, talking and laughing. Soon they were hurrying back to their seats, because the bell ending intermission was ringing.

"Can't you tell me what happened? Did you have a fight?" Valya kept at us.

"No, we didn't. It's just an agreement we have." Java didn't want to go into any details, because we were walking down the aisle to our seats.

"What kind of an agreement?" Valya asked. (Girls sure are nosey.)

"I'll tell you later."

"All right. But don't sneak away."

"We won't."

Chapter 6

BUDKA. AN EAR FOR AN EAR

Java'd gotten over my three thumps by the time the play ended and we left the theatre. He was stretching his neck like a rooster (you'd think he was about to crow), looking over the heads of the other kids. He was searching for Valya.

"Come on, let's go. We don't want to be stuck with her. She just rattles on and on," I muttered.

I was still feeling awful. My conscience was bent double under the weight of the watch I felt would never be returned to its owner now. I might just as well go shouting up and down the streets, trying to find him. But how could I ever find him by shouting if I didn't know his name or address, and Kiev was a city of a million and a half inhabitants, to say nothing of the five hundred thousand visitors who passed through it each day? It was a hopeless situation. It was enough to make me howl. But Java was tuned in to another station, and my worries weren't his worries now.

"What d'you mean let's go?" he said. "We promised to wait for her, didn't we? D'you want to make me lie again? I'll start socking you if you don't watch out."

Oh, so we promised, did we? That was a nice how-d'you-do! He'd been the one who'd done all the promising. There was no reason dragging me into it. I had nothing to do with it, but before I had a chance to say a word Valya darted out of the crowd with her kid brother Mikola in tow and came hurrying towards us.

"I was looking for you in the lobby. I thought you'd be waiting for me there. Come on," she said.

We started down the street towards Vatutin Park. Valya kept yakking all the way, but I wasn't listening. Nothing she had to

say was of any interest to me. Then all of a sudden I heard her say my name.

"Why is Pavlik such a sour puss? And angry, too. He isn't sick, is he? Or maybe something's happened?" Valya was saying.

"You're the one who's sick," I said to myself and glared at her. I was no concern of hers.

Java's eyes bored holes through me. I could see he was saying: "I'm sorry, pal, but I can't lie. You'll have to forgive me." Aloud he said, "It's like this." He sighed. "Something happened." And he went on to tell her all about it: about the watch, and about our going from one theatre to another all that morning.

At first I wanted to stop him from telling her about it, but then I decided it didn't really matter, because even if he did tell her, it wouldn't change anything. As Valya listened she kept gasping and when he finished she began babbling excitedly:

"What d'you know! It's so exciting! What a story! Of course you've got to find him." All of a sudden her eyes lit up. "You know what? I think I know somebody who can help you. He's an old retired actor. His name's Maxim Valerianovich, and he lives near me. He's on pension now, but he still knows all the actors and actresses. You tell him what the actor you're looking for looks like, and I bet you he'll know who he is. Want me to introduce you to him?"

We looked at each other. Java was beaming. We had no guarantee that Maxim Valerianovich could help us, but there was no harm in trying. I couldn't afford to turn down the offer.

"D'you think he's home now?" I asked. This meant I was going along with the idea.

"He should be. He's a sick man and stays home a lot. Come on."

As we entered the familiar yard we heard loud dance music. It was coming from a second-floor balcony where some big kids

were playing a tape recorder. I decided this was a good omen, because when things're going well in a movie the music on the sound track's always lively. We started walking in step to the music, thinking that Maxim Valerianovich lived in the same house as Valya. But she said, "No, this way," and turned into an archway. We felt uneasy. We didn't want her to guess we'd been in her house before. Luckily, it was dark in the archway, so she didn't notice our funny expressions. We came out into a back yard. It was lined with old sheds. There were an awful lot of them, of all sizes and shapes, some two-storied with railings on the second floor. Cats peered out at us from the dark spaces between the sheds, and their eyes flashed like green flames.

We passed the row of sheds and started down a path that led through a thicket of boxthorn. The monastery was off to the left. Its ancient brick fortress wall with loopholes cut in it would suddenly come into sight and then be lost again behind the trees and bushes. The thicket was dark and mysterious close up near the wall, and the air smelled of dampness, cold and rotting leaves.

"What a place for playing Cossacks and robbers!" Java whispered.

True, it was a perfect place for Cossacks and robbers. The golden cupola of a belfry suddenly blazed up ahead of us. To the right of the cupola– Ha! I knew what that was! It was a high-voltage line tower. Those tall iron towers were strung out clear across the fields back home, going off as far as the horizon. We went down to the belfry. The huge iron gate was open. A vaulted entrance led to the monastery's inner yard. Valya was about to walk by the gate when Java said,

"How about popping in for a minute? Just to have a look."

"Oh, no!" I said and made a face. I was in a hurry to get on with the watch business.

But Java's eyes were shining with nearly the same kind of green fire I'd seen in the backyard cats' eyes. I guessed he was busy filling up the ancient loopholes and monastery yard with mysterious strangers, detectives and spies. He could probably hear the sound of gunfire, of somebody shouting: "Hands up!", of a chase, and of everything else you'll find in a good movie. It was no use arguing.

"We'll just have a quick look, that's all," he said and looked at me hopefully.

"Why, sure! You've never been inside. Come on, let's go!" Valya said.

What could I do but follow?

"The monastery ends here," Valya was saying. "This is the Belltower in the Far Caves and this is the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God."

But she might've saved her breath. You could read all about it on the plaques. That was exactly what Java was doing, since reading plaques was one of his hobbies.

"The Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God, erected in 1696," he read aloud.

"That's why it's coming apart at the seams," I said. "What they need here is general repairs."

Yes, indeed, the old church next to the newly restored gold-cupolaed belfry looked down-at-the-heels and abandoned. Its cupolas were dark in spots and peeling. The walls were cracked. The windows were broken. Some lopsided scaffolding made of rusty pipes had been left outside the church. Now it looked as old as the church itself. The entrance was bricked up.

The small churchyard was surrounded by the fortress wall in which there were square little windows and narrow loopholes. Some old graves marked by crosses, iron grates and marble monuments were scattered around in a quiet, grassy nook among the trees. We walked all around the church. Then, just as we were about to leave, Java stopped to look at the inscriptions on two of the tombstones. They read:

GENERAL P. S. KAISAROV,
HERO OF THE PATRIOTIC WAR OF 1812,
AIDE DE CAMP TO
FIELD-MARSHAL M. I. KUTUZOV
ERECTED IN 1951 BY HIS GRATEFUL COUNTRYMEN

and:

GENERAL A. I. KRASOVSKY,
HERO OF THE PATRIOTIC WAR OF 1812,
COMRADE-IN-ARMS OF M. I. KUTUZOV
ERECTED IN 1951 BY HIS GRATEFUL COUNTRYMEN

"See?" Java said. "See the historic generals that're buried here? And you didn't even want to stop for a minute."

"We've a lot of historic people here," said Valya. "Kochubei and Iskra are buried in the monastery. Ushinsky's buried in Vydubechi Monastery. Yuri Dolgoruky, the founder of Moscow, is buried in the Church of Our Saviour of Berestovo."

Java looked at me proudly. You'd think he'd just said all that.

"We'll go have a look at some of them later," I said. "We've got to find that Valerianovich guy first."

"Right. Come on," Valya said.

We went out through the gate and followed the fortress wall, going downhill all the time. Those monks sure picked a good spot for their monastery. It was on top of a hill on the bank of the Dnieper River and gave them a perfect view of everything. Down the winding path we went to a paved walk. That took us to a crooked little street lined with lopsided whitewashed huts.

Each had a front garden. The TV antennas sticking up from the roofs were the only sign that people still lived in these houses, that they weren't something out of the past.

Valya stopped at one of the huts. It looked like the worst one of all. Dirty white hens were scratching around in the tiny yard, bobbing their heads up and down nervously, while a bright rooster with a flashing red comb was strutting around. There were no rows of vegetables or berry bushes like there were in front of the other houses on the street, nothing but flowers: roses, peonies, hollyhocks and phloxes. The little hut looked like a toy house set in the middle of a flower garden. The walls were freshly whitewashed, just like those of huts in any Ukrainian village, with a broad blue strip running around the bottom of the house. Hanging high up under the roof were little bunches of drying herbs.

We followed Valya into the yard, then to the creaky wooden porch that was nearly level with the ground. Valya knocked. Nobody answered. She shrugged, then went to the window and held her hands over her eyes as she pressed her face to the pane.

"He's gone," she said apologetically. "He must've gone to see his nephew. He visits him on Sundays when he's feeling all right. But don't worry, he'll be back soon. He usually goes early in the morning and comes back in time for lunch."

The street with the little whitewashed huts was so like the village streets I'd always known that I relaxed. I felt that the man who lived here would certainly help us. I was ready to wait for him till dark if I had to.

"Let's go to my house. I'll show you my books and my photographs. I've got two albums full of photographs. He'll be back soon, don't worry," Valya said. You'd think it was her fault that Maxim Valerianovich was feeling good enough to go visiting his nephew.

We turned back. All we'd just seen was so strange. First there'd been the busy city street full of traffic, then the old

church, the quiet, the old graves and the inscriptions Java'd read; then the dark brick fortress wall, and then *zowie*! the towers of the high-voltage line sticking up into the air; and then a crooked little village street, Maxim Valerianovich's hut, the clucking hens, and the hollyhocks and peonies by the window. Down below was the embankment, the trolley cars, buses, motorcycles and cars. To the right was Paton Bridge. To the left was another fine bridge with the rails of the Metro line coming out of the ground and crossing it over the Dnieper. It was amazing to see all this old and new side by side.

We were soon back near the sheds. A big-headed, broad-faced boy wearing a plaid shirt and jeans was sitting on the second-story rail of one of the sheds. When Valya saw him she shouted,

"Hey, Budka! Did you ring our bell again yesterday? If you don't quit it, you're going to be in a lot of trouble!"

"Dry up," Budka said and spat through his teeth.

"Just you wait!"

"Shut your coffin and stop rattling your bones!" Budka sneered.

"What's the matter?" Java said icily.

It was all as clear as day to us, but we decided to wait till she explained.

"Can you imagine? He rings our bell and runs away. That's how he gets his kicks."

The look Java flashed at me made me feel hot all over. "Come on, Pavlik!" he said.

We dashed to the stairs leading up to the second floor.

"Stop, boys! Don't mess around with him! He's mean!" Valya shouted (she thought we were just being brave and standing up for her).

We stamped up the stairs like sailors running up a gangway, paying no attention to her. Budka had no place to retreat to.

Besides, he didn't look like he wanted to. He slipped off the railing, leaned against it and crossed his arms on his chest. He was about our age, but heavier and stronger. No matter. We'd fought enemies bigger'n him in the pasture back home.

"So you like to ring doorbells, do you?" Java hissed, advancing on him.

Budka didn't move a muscle. He just stood there with his arms crossed on his chest. "Don't strain too hard, or you'll bust a gut," he muttered. "I'm studying karate, and I know a few holds that'll send you flying."

"That's what you think!" Java hissed again and grabbed hold of Budka's ear with all five fingers, making it a handful.

Budka jerked and tried to punch Java in the stomach, but Java used his free hand to grab hold of Budka's fist, while I grabbed his other hand. Besides, we were each standing on one of his feet: Java on his left and I on his right. That's so he couldn't kick us. It was plain old village karate, and we'd learned it when we were babies.

Budka squirmed and jerked, but we had him in a vice. Java kept working on his ear, saying,

"You're lucky we're not messing up your mug. We're just delivering what's coming to you. Somebody asked us to give you the message."

At first Budka kept muttering, "Quit it! Lay off!" Then he tried to break free. He was panting. Then tears sprang to his eyes and he begged us to let him go. "Leggo! Come on! Leggo! Le–"

"You going to keep on ringing those bells?"

"N-no," Budka bleated, swallowing his tears.

We led him over to the stairs and let him go, though I did knee him in the backside as a parting shot, sending him tumbling down. He landed on the ground, jumped up, ran off a few steps, turned, wiped his tears, smearing them all

over his face, and yelled, "Just you wait! Wait'll I get you!" He shook his fist at us and galloped off.

Valya and Mikola welcomed us like we were cosmonauts coming down the gangway of a TU-134 at Vnukovo Airport after a space flight. All we needed now was a brass band and flowers. Mikola was jumping up and down, shouting, "Boy, oh, boy! Boy, oh, boy! All the kids're scared of Budka and you've ... boy, oh, boy! Wait'll I tell them!"

We tried to look like it was nothing special, just everyday stuff.

"What kind of a name is Budka? That's no name," I said.

"That's his nickname. His real name's Tolik. He's awful," Mikola said. By the way he said it I guessed he'd had his share of whacks from Budka.

All of a sudden Valya shouted, "Look! There's Maxim Valerianovich!"

Coming through the gate, leaning on a cane and walking slowly, was a tall man.

Chapter 7

MAXIM VALERIANOVICH

If not for the way he dragged his feet, it would probably be hard to tell whether he was young or old, because his bright blue eyes sparkled, he had a lot of hair that was just turning gray, and his cheeks were as shiny and rosy as polished apples. All this made him look very youngish. I wondered, as I had when we'd been on the beach, about the old people in Kiev being so different from the old folks back home.

"Hello, Maxim Valerianovich. We came to see you, but you were out," Valya said, running up to him.

"Hello there. What seems to be the trouble?" Maxim Valerianovich said and smiled. He had two rows of very white false teeth.

"It's very serious, you can't imagine," Valya began, speaking non-stop, as always. "You've got to help."

"I certainly will if I can, my dear friends. Everything I have at the disposal of my seventy-six years is yours."

Valya opened her mouth to start telling him all about everything when he raised his hand and said,

"No, no, child! I beg of thee! May your lips be sealed for now. Not a word. If it's a serious matter, it cannot be resolved on the spot, out on the street like this. Welcome to my abode. There we shall find joy in concourse."

This joking sort of lofty tone made me like the old actor right away. Java and I both grinned. We felt like we'd known him for years.

"You're probably surprised to see that I live in such a little hut," Maxim Valerianovich said with a smile when we reached the door. "I've been offered many fine apartments, but I don't want to move. I can't live without these flowers, without this quiet street. Do come in."

The house had two little rooms and a tiny kitchen, and the ceilings were so low he could touch them. This was probably why, or maybe it was because of the bushes and trees outside which covered part of the windows, everything inside seemed a shadowy green even though it was a bright, sunny day. It was even hard to picture these little rooms as being bright and sunny. They looked much better in the shade. There were big and small flower pots in the rooms and in the kitchen. They were set on the window-sills, on stools, on special little shelves and right on the floor. I recognized the lilies, primulas and rubber plants, but there were more cacti than anything else. I never knew there were so many different kinds: small little round ones like prickly green hedgehogs and large floppy ones that looked like prehistoric lizards, and some that had nothing but prickles, and others that had hardly any. They were of all shapes and colors, and of all sizes. There were grown-up, solemn-looking ones and fuzzy little baby ones. It was a real cacti kingdom out of some book of fairy-tales.

The house was also filled with photographs. Framed photographs lined the walls. Most of them were of Maxim Valerianovich in different costumes and poses: Maxim Valerianovich in a top hat. Maxim Valerianovich in an astrakhan fur hat. Maxim Valerianovich in an embroidered skullcap. Maxim Valerianovich with a mustache and without a mustache. Maxim Valerianovich as a sailor. Maxim Valerianovich as a Cossack. Maxim Valerianovich as a vagabond (in rags). Maxim Valerianovich in a fur coat. Maxim Valerianovich in a dressing-gown. Maxim Valerianovich – naked. He wasn't actually naked, because he did have on a loincloth. That was probably in some jungle role. It made me dizzy to see all those Maxim Valerianoviches looking down at us.

In the corner where religious people hang their icons there was something I thought was an icon, too. It was set on an embroidered runner, and the frame glinted like gold. I had another look. It was a photograph of a man in a pince-nez with

a cigarette dangling out of the corner of his mouth. This was no icon.

Valya later told us it was a portrait of Konstantin Stanislavsky, the famous actor and founder of the Moscow Art Theatre whom all the actors and actresses thought of as their god. He was kind, and smiling, and jolly. Valya said he created a very good system, but she didn't know exactly what it was, even though, as she said, the Stanislavsky System was being used all over the world. But this was later.

Meanwhile, while Java and I looked at the photographs, Valya told Maxim Valerianovich all about the watch and our adventures. She told it all so well you'd have thought it'd happened to her. Since Maxim Valerianovich was her friend, and since she wasn't at all shy in his presence, we let her tell it. All we did was put in a word here and there. Maxim Valerianovich listened carefully. When she was through he smiled and said,

"Well now, my dear fellow-citizens, the plot is clear. You've

become villains through no fault of yours. Such things will happen, but one must never lose heart. If the man really is an actor and if he's in Kiev, we'll find him if we have to turn the whole city upside-down. The fact that you didn't find his photograph in any of the theatres you went to doesn't mean a thing. He might be here on tour. There are three or four theatres from other cities on tour in Kiev now, so there are still quite a few places to look. However, my friends, we'll have to put off our search till tomorrow, for these two damsels (he pointed to his feet) are very capricious. They simply refuse to do any amount of walking, especially Miss Lefty. Miss Righty is not as stubborn, but I cannot manage Miss Lefty at all. I've got a helper for them (at this he nodded at the gnarled cane with a carved dog's head for a handle), but they still won't co-operate. I shan't be able to coax them into setting out before morning, no matter how I try. Besides, it's getting late now, and the evening performances will soon begin. No actor must be disturbed before he goes on. He must never be distracted from the role he is to play.

"Now then, this is our plan: we meet tomorrow morning and proceed to the set together. Yes, to the film studios. I appear in one of the scenes they're shooting tomorrow. I can only play sedentary roles nowadays. Anyway, while we're there we'll set up our search headquarters and get on the trail of your 'tsar' with the aid of young talent (I mean fleet-footed young actors), on the one hand, and, on the other, with the aid of that 20th century marvel, the telephone. We'll spread out our network, go into action and – the watch finds its owner!"

He said this so simply and so convincingly that I just knew it would all end well. I was smiling. And Java was smiling. And Valya was smiling. And her kid brother Mikola was smiling, too. I so wanted to say something nice to Maxim Valerianovich, to show him how I appreciated what he was doing. I looked up at the photographs and said,

"You mean you acted in so many plays? Golly!"

He smiled slyly, as if he'd understood why I'd said that. "Yes, I've appeared in some few plays in my lifetime, my dear friends. Yes, indeed." then he looked up at the walls that were covered with photographs, and his eyes came to rest on a large picture of the Kiev Opera House. "This is a most venerable building," he said. "This is where I first attended a performance, where I first saw a stage and actors. This is where I first saw a curtain go up."

Maxim Valerianovich was silent for a moment. Then he continued. "Yes, it was all very long ago. Strange as it seems, and you can take my word for it, I was a very little boy at the time. Much younger than you are now. We had just moved to Kiev from the country, and my mother was taken on as a cleaning lady in the opera house. One day she took me along to hear 'La Traviata'. That's an opera by Verdi. Have you ever heard of it?"

"Sure. We heard it over the radio," Java said proudly, and to put the final touch on it, so's there'd be no doubt about it, he sang a few bars of the music "La-la-la la-la la-la" in a piping voice.

"Yes, yes," Maxim Valerianovich said and smiled. "Yes, that's from 'La Traviata'. I was sitting in the electrician's booth, right above the stage (my mother had asked him to let me watch the performance from there). I could hear every word, see every movement. I sat there wondering whether it was not all a part of some dream, of some fairy-tale. I could not believe I was seeing it all with my own eyes. In the last act, when Violetta dies, I was so carried away and believed so sincerely that she was truly dying that I became enraged by what I considered to be the abominable behaviour of Alfred and Germont. Here was a poor dying woman, and there were those two scoundrels, singing away. I was unable to contain my wrath and shouted: 'Stop singing! She's dying! Do something!' The electrician, who was sitting beside me, nearly tumbled off

his chair. Luckily, the orchestra was playing a powerful *crescendo* just then, and Germont and Alfred's voices were soaring, so that no one actually heard my enraged squeaks. It all ended with the electrician cuffing me and putting me out into the corridor, so that I did not actually hear the end of the opera. But I was captivated by the theatre for life.

"No matter how hard my mother tried to make a decent man of me (in her opinion a decent man was a clerk in some office), she failed. I clerked for less than two years, quit my job at the first opportunity and was taken on as an extra in Kruchinin's troupe. An extra is an actor who has no lines to speak and only takes part in the crowd scenes. His name never appears on the playbill. All this was very long ago."

Maxim Valerianovich looked excited. His eyes sparkled, his cheeks were crimson. I always like to listen to old people's stories about when they were young. Why is it that even though they might be telling you about something that wasn't important at all it's still interesting? If it'd all be happening right now I'm sure it wouldn't sound a bit interesting.

"Ah, my dears, those first years in the theatre were like a first love. I don't believe anyone else was as devoted to his work as I, spent as much time making up as I, or was as nervous as I was before he went on, even though I was only onstage for a minute, one of a crowd of extras. I never opened my mouth. I was never noticed by the audience. But it seemed to me that all eyes were on me. After a while I was given a small part. It was actually an infinitesimal part. I'd come onstage and deliver but a single line: "The Countess is ill and will be unable to receive you.' Then I would turn and exit. That was my entire part. Yet, I was convinced that the gist of the play lay in my words, and I delivered them as though I were announcing the advent of Doomsday. Now, for the first time in my life, all eyes really were on me. Everyone was listening to me. I cannot tell you what that feeling was like, especially since my line completed Act One. The curtain

fell. Everyone applauded. I felt they were applauding me alone."

Maxim Valerianovich then went on to tell us more about the theatre and his life.

Java and I were silent all the way home. We were thinking. This was the first time we'd ever met a real, live actor, an actor of the stage and screen.

Chapter 8

"YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, MR. TSAR!" "I'VE GOT YOU NOW!"

It was evening. We were stretched out on the big couch by the open window. The day had been crammed full, we'd have to be blocks of wood to pop off to sleep the minute our heads hit the pillows. Java kept tossing around like something was biting him. I know all there is to know about my friend. I knew what was biting him. A new idea was biting him, that's what. That's why he was tossing around.

"Well? What is it?" I said.

Java sighed, but de didn't say anything.

"Come on. Shoot."

He sighed again and said, "You know, Pavlik, I've decided I'm probably going to be an actor when I grow up."

"But who's going to be a militiaman? Who's going to battle crime?" I snickered. "If every militiaman decides to be an actor there'll be more criminals running around than ants in an anthill. Did you ever think of that?"

"Don't worry. There'll still be enough militiamen left to battle crime if I change my mind."

"Remember what you said yesterday? Not the day before yesterday, but yesterday?"

"That was yesterday. This is today. Time marches on."

"By the way, in case you're interested, you've got to have talent to be an actor. In case you didn't know."

"That's the last thing I've got to worry about. You and me've got more talent than we need. In case you're interested. Why, you'd be a great actor, too! You'd make audiences weep!"

"I sure would," I giggled. "They'd be crying over the money they wasted on theatre tickets."

"Ah, shut up! Isn't Grandpa Salivon forever saying we're a couple of comedians?"

It's hard to argue when somebody tells you to your face that you've got talent and then goes on to prove it. I mumbled something, but didn't argue any more.

Java talked on without any interruptions now. "Being an actor's the best kind of thing. They live the best kinds of lives, full of music, and singing, and applause. Every day's a holiday to them. And the fame! Think of the fame! Everybody recognizes an actor. They're more famous than the greatest professors. Would you ever recognize a great professor if you saw his picture? Never! But every dumb kid knows all the movie actors. Why, everybody even knows an actor who's only been in one lousy movie, even if he only flashes by on the screen. When he goes down the street everybody points at him and says: 'There he is! That's him!' Aren't I right?"

I had to agree.

We went on talking about how great it'd be to be a famous actor until we finally fell asleep. And I had a dream. By the way, my dreams are usually all mixed up and full of crazy adventures. I like to tell my friends about them. Java always asks me to. He says my life's much more interesting when I'm asleep. He says I'd probably have more fun if I just kept on sleeping and never woke up.

Anyway, I had a dream. I dreamed I was sitting on a tsar's throne in the middle of a stage wearing a tsar's huge fur coat. For some reason or other the fur coat stank just like Grandpa Salivon's mutt. I had a gold crown on my head and held a big club called a sceptre.

I could see cows looking at me from the dark of the theatre, from the orchestra and the balconies. I wasn't at all surprised to see them and other cattle in the seats. It seemed all right to

me. There in the first row were our one-horned cow Manka, Java's Contribution, Zhora the goat, and Petka the farm's bull. Every now and then I'd wink at them on the sly so's the rest of the audience wouldn't notice, just like an actor probably winks at his relatives who've come to see the show.

Meanwhile, I was delivering a long speech. There were no words in it, but it was very clever and interesting. After a while I ended and bowed my head, waiting for the audience to applaud. There was a dead silence. That's when I finally realized what the matter was: how could they clap if they had hooves instead of hands? Did you ever hear of anybody with hooves clapping? What a sap I was! The audience couldn't applaud. All they could do was bleat and moo, but they didn't dare out of respect for me. So they were silent. That's how they expressed their admiration for my acting. Manka and Contribution sighed emotionally. Zhora the goat wiped his eyes with the tip of his beard, while Petka the bull, who'd always been a bully, was crying like baby. I was so overcome that I stood up, but instead of bowing I suddenly cracked my whip (I had a whip in my hand now instead of the sceptre). The audience jumped to its feet with a terrible clatter, and a moment later the theatre was empty. There was not a living soul left in it. Nothing but rows of seats.

Just then who should come out of the wings but Java. He was dressed in a militiaman's uniform. He clumped over to me in his big boots and said, "Why're we breaking the law? Stop breaking the law or I'll arrest you."

"You've no right to talk to me like that. Don't you know I'm the tsar?" I said.

"That's what you think! You're a thief! You stole the real tsar's watch. I've a warrant for your arrest. You're under arrest, Mr. Tsar!" And Java shoved a piece of paper at me.

I was really scared. "Don't be like that, Java," I said. "You know what happened. It was an accident."

"A thief like you has to right to talk to me, a militiaman on duty, like I was a friend of yours! That's breaking the law again!"

"Excuse me. I thought we were friends."

"Well, you thought wrong," Java said sternly. Then, all of a sudden he threw a square of canvas over my head. Now I was bound hand and foot. I couldn't see a thing. A frayed thread in the canvas tickled my face, but I couldn't brush it away. I couldn't stand it. I wanted to scream, but the scream died in my throat and–I woke up.

There was a fly on my face. When I opened my eyes it was right on the tip of my nose, rubbing one front leg against the other busily. I blew it off. It buzzed around near the ceiling and then landed on my forehead. That put an end to my sleep.

I sat up and looked at Java, the militiaman of my dream. He was sound asleep, lying on his side with his hand under his cheek like a baby.

"Don't break the law, huh? Some friend you are!" I muttered and poked him hard.

He sat up with a jolt, blinked sleepily and said, "Mm... What is it?"

"Get up. I'm up, and I'm bored."

"You're a stupid idiot, that's what!" he said. He fell back on his pillow and shut his eyes.

"Don't break the law!" I snapped, just like a militiaman.

"Leave me alone! I want to sleep."

"To hell with you, sleepyhead!" I tumbled out of bed and went to the balcony to get a breath of fresh air.

What a morning it was! It was bright and shiny, and full of singing. Radios, record players and tape recorders were playing,

and sad and happy songs were floating out of many windows. All of them that morning were being sung by an Italian boy named Robertino Loretti, whose songs were very popular in Kiev that summer.

Boy, if Java and me could sing like that! We wouldn't have to waste any more time trying to think of a way to get famous. We'd just stand on a stage next to a grand piano, push out our chests and open our mouths.

But no, the kind of voices we had were only good for shouting: "Fire!" or "Help!". Maybe we could be movie actors, though. Yes, that's what we'd be! We'd be in the movies! It was such a happy thought it made my stomach feel all warm. We were going to a real studio in a couple of hours. We'd be on a real set where they were shooting a real movie. We'd see a lot of famous movie actors, and we'd see how a real movie was shot. And a lot of other interesting things, besides. I couldn't wait.

By then Java'd gotten up. We had a quick breakfast and were off.

People in the morning look different than at any other time of the day: they all look clean and fresh, and as crunchy as new cucumbers, and their eyes are as bright as fresh flowers.

I kept looking at everyone and at everything as we rode along in the bus. I was feeling great. I loved everybody, and life was beautiful.

We marched smartly into Valya's yard. We were going to call for her, and from her house we were all going to call for Maxim Valerianovich. All of a sudden we saw a crowd of boys, twenty at least. One of them was Budka. They were playing some game right outside the door to Valya's house. We stopped. Just then Budka noticed us. A mean smile lit up his face. He said something to the boys. They all started running towards us. A minute later we were surrounded.

"This is it. They've got us now," I said to myself.

"Back to back, Pavlik!" Java shouted.

I spun around in a flash and got my back up against his. We stood there, back to back, with our fists up, as the circle of boys got smaller and closer. Budka was waving his fists in Java's face, shouting,

"I've got you now!"

By then I was shoving away a lanky, pasty-faced kid who was closing in on me. Someone kicked my ankle hard. There'd be a free-for-all in another minute, but it wouldn't be a fight, it'd be a massacre. It'd be the end of us. My skin crept as I waited for them to begin hitting me. Then I heard Java saying in a loud, taunting voice,

"Boy, there sure are a lot of you. It's all of you against just the two of us. Aren't you brave?"

"What's he saying? They'll kill us!" I said to myself. I was terrified.

"Say that again, you rat!" Budka snapped. "Wait'll I get my hands on you!" And he swung.

"He's right, you know," someone said calmly. "Ganging up on them is chicken. You fight one of them, Budka. That'll be fair. And honest. And you'll get your revenge. We'll judge the fight, to see that all's fair and square." The boy who'd said that was about fourteen. He was standing in back of the others, but he was taller than them so we could see his curly head above the ones in front. Budka dropped his fist. He didn't like the idea, but there was nothing he could do. He sized Java up, then me, and muttered,

"All right. I'll fight this one," and he poked me in the chest. "He looks stronger."

That was a lie. Java looks much stronger than I, but none of the boys said anything.

"Let's go to the ravine," the curly-haired boy said.

They herded us towards the ravine. Something in my stomach kept sinking lower and lower.

"Why did he have to pick me?" a tiny little voice bleated inside of me, but I didn't say a thing. Couldn't. After all, I was a man.

Java didn't say a word, either. I knew what he was feeling: he was feeling guilty (He'd been the one to mangle Budka's ear. I'd only held him). I could see Java was worried, because I'd have to fight Budka instead of him. But there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't say he wanted to fight him instead of me. That'd be the same as saying I was a weakling. That'd be like spitting in my face. No, he could never do that. I understood him. I'd die before I'd be disgraced.

We went down into the ravine, making our way through the prickly, dusty boxthorn bushes.

"Here," the curly-haired boy said, and we all came to a halt on a small clearing facing a steep rise on one side and ringed by boxthorn on the other three sides.

The boys spread out, forming a semi-circle by the bushes. I stood in the middle, facing my enemy. For a few moments we just stood there, leaning forward, swaying slightly, sizing each other up. Budka was taller than I, and broader, and stronger. I had no choice, though. At any rate, it was better to fight one kid, even though he was Budka, than a whole pack of them.

You probably know you feel scared before a fight actually begins. Then your fright vanishes. Instead, there's rage, pain and hot temper.

Budka swung. Though I ducked, he still slipped me hard. I saw red. Ah, you louse! Ah, you rat! Getting a gang of your pals to watch you show off! But when you fought us alone you ran away, smearing snot all over your face! Why, you... And I threw myself into battle, springing back and forth, socking and ducking, while he just stood there, shifting his

weight from one foot to the other, swinging his long arms wide.

"Come on, Budka!"

"Hit him!"

"Sock him in the stomach!"

"Get him on the chin!"

But Budka just stood there, huffing and swinging his arms like a windmill. At last he got hold of my shirt and locked his arms around me. We fell and rolled in the dust.

"Keep him under!"

"Keep him down!"

"Flat on his back!" Budka's pals shouted.

But Budka's goose was cooked. He, not I, was now flat on his back. I had him under me and was pressing him to the ground. Our faces were nearly touching. We were both panting. In a few more seconds Budka stopped wriggling and gave up. I'd won!

"Oh, no! That's not fair! It's against the rules!" I heard them shouting. Somebody was dragging me off him.

I raised my head. It was the lanky kid whom I'd poked in the chest. He was pulling me off Budka. I knew I'd fought clean and honest, but I was so out of breath I couldn't talk. I looked at the curly-headed boy hoping he'd say something, but he didn't. It looked like he didn't want to interfere. That's when I knew my luck'd run out. They were all Budka's pals. They wanted him to win. Otherwise, what was the use of having us fight one to one? Why, they could've beaten Java and me up easily. My victory was their disgrace. They'd never let me get away with it. You can only fight well if you've got some hope of winning, but when there's no hope... I was on my back now, and a revived Budka was sitting on top of me, knocking my head against the ground, getting his revenge. Java was shouting something, but what could he do?

Bang! *Bang*! *Bang*! went my head. It was ringing like a bell.

I saw stars. I couldn't think straight. All of a sudden someone shouted,

"Shame on you! Shame on you! Let him go! This minute! Get off him!" It was Valya.

The ringing in my head stopped the same moment. Budka tumbled off me. I could see the clear blue sky up above and white doves circling there. Valya'd obviously appeared from someplace. She'd obviously shoved Budka off me, and she was now standing over me, waving her arms and shouting,

"Shame on you! You're supposed to be Young Pioneers! You're thugs, that's what you are! Wait'll I tell on you! I'll tell your teachers! And your parents! Your parents, Alec! And yours, Volodia! And yours, Edik! And as for you, Budka, I'll report you to the militia, and you'll be arrested as a juvenile delinquent! Just you wait! These are country boys. They've come on a visit. And you ganged up on them! That's great hospitality, isn't it? Shame on you!"

While she was shouting she pulled me up from the ground, took me by the hand, got hold of Java on the way and dragged us off. Our enemies made way for us. No one tried to stop us. No one said a word. After we'd gone off a ways someone whistled loudly. Then the whole gang ran off along the ravine. They looked just like peas spilling out of a sack. Maybe they would've acted differently if Valya hadn't shown up, but they seemed to have decided that Budka'd gotten even after all. I felt wobbly and wiped the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

"Good for you, Pavlik! Boy, did you lay him flat! All he could do was wriggle," Java shouted, throwing an arm around my shoulders. "You sure showed them what Vasukovka kids are worth! Good for you!"

I was glad he said it, but sorry that Valya hadn't been there to see it. She'd only showed up when I was flat on my back. She'd sort of rescued me. I was grateful to her, no doubt about

it,' cause who knew how long Budka would've gone on banging my poor head on the ground? All the same, though, I was ashamed: I'd been rescued by a girl. It was like she'd seen me stark naked. Still, I was happy. I'd won the first time, and that's what counted. And Budka was bigger and stronger than I. He'd only picked on me because he thought I couldn't fight.

Mikola was waiting for us on the path. He said he'd seen the gang herding us towards the ravine and guessed we were in for a rough time, so he'd run off for help, meaning Valya.

"You were great, too, Valya," Java said. "You weren't a bit scared of them. They might've ganged up on you, too."

"I'd like to see them try! I'd've screamed so loud I'd've wakened the dead, and I can scratch real hard. If anybody had laid a finger on me his own mother wouldn't have recognized him."

Java looked at her admiringly and nudged me, as if to say: isn't she something? I nodded, as if to say: yes, she is, but let's not go on talking about it.

Though Valya and Java tried hard to brush the dirt off me, I still looked like a mess. Maxim Valerianovich was probably worrying about us by now, and we had to hurry.

He greeted us with a smile and said, "Good morning, lady and gentlemen," Then he had another look at me and held up his hand, even though I'd no intention of saying anything. "Not a word! It's all clear to me. There was an armed skirmish. A border incident. I won't inquire as to the reasons, but I assume it was of major importance. A question of honour. The desire for justice to be done. A duel. Despite the difficulties, you emerged the victor. Am I right?"

I smiled and nodded. What a terrific man he was! He could make you feel good, no matter what.

Maxim Valerianovich didn't ask us any more questions. All

he said was, "A car's coming for me in ten minutes. You're just in time. You can all come along to the set with me."

We didn't have to wait ten minutes. About two minutes later we heard a car stop outside Maxim Valerianovich's house. The car door opened, then slammed shut, and a man called out.

"Here I am, Maxim Valerianovich! Ready?"

Chapter 9

ON THE SET. THE FIRST SURPRISE. THE SECOND SURPRISE

We drove up to a big gate, the gate that separated the everyday world from the magic, fantastic, fairy-tale world of the movies. I was disappointed to see that it was a very ordinary kind of gate and so low you wouldn't even have to climb it. You could just vault over it. That's not the kind of gate I'd have in front of a movie studio if it was up to me. I'd have a huge, double, wrought-iron gate five-stories high, like the one in front of the Winter Palace in Leningrad that I saw in a movie. Or even higher. This was where they made movies, after all! Anyway, the little gate swung open and we drove into the studio yard.

To the left was a fruit orchard, so huge you'd think we were on a fruit-growing farm. I couldn't see the end of it. To the right was a row of billboards. On one of them we read: "Art belongs to the people" "... Of all the arts films are the most important in our times (V. I. Lenin)". On another we read: "Everything about a person should be beautiful: his face, his clothing, his soul, his mind (Anton Chekhov)".

I sighed. My face was a mess, my clothes were crumpled and dirty, and every time I thought about the watch my soul curled up and died. Only in my mind was I great and did fine, noble deeds. But no one could read my mind.

We followed Maxim Valerianovich out of the car and through the revolving door into the building. Java sniffed and made a face. So did I. The place smelled like a hospital. A door on the left led into something that looked like a dispensary. I decided that shooting a film was probably a dangerous business if the medics had to be on the job and ready.

We climbed a short staircase and started down the longest corridor I'd ever seen. Java and I'd once read a piece about a movie studio. It said that miracles began the minute you crossed the threshold. You might see Peter the Great talking to a cosmonaut, a Roman gladiator getting a light from a World War II ace, and the fairy queen of some underwater kingdom telling a farm girl about the gorgeous blouse she'd bought the day before.

We couldn't wait to see it all begin. We kept craning our necks, but all we saw in that long corridor were ordinary people dressed in very ordinary clothes. Some even had on overalls. There wasn't a single gladiator or mermaid in sight. We'd probably come on an off day. Too bad. And then, all of a sudden –

"Look!" Java's elbow jabbed my side.

Coming towards us was a man in a khaki uniform. He was tall and stern-looking.

"I think that's Kadochnikov. He's probably a partisan in some movie," Java whispered.

The partisan smiled and saluted Maxim Valerianovich, who also smiled and said hello. When we'd passed the man I got up the courage to say,

"Uh... Who's he, Maxim Valerianovich? What's his name?"

"Petrenko," Maxim Valerianovich said, and I thought he sounded surprised. "He's a fine man. He's the studio fire chief."

Yuk!

"I like the old-fashioned kind of firemen better, the ones that wore big brass helmets. This kind's awful mousy-looking," Java muttered. He was trying not to look at me.

We kept on walking. The corridor was narrow and dim, and nearly everyone we met, and it seemed like an awfully crowded place, said hello to Maxim Valerianovich. It was just like walking down the village street back home where you said hello to everybody.

At last Maxim Valerianovich stopped outside a door with a cardboard sign on it that read: "Kiss Me, My Friends!" There was a terrible commotion going on inside. It sounded like a big crowd, with everybody shouting and arguing, but when Maxim Valerianovich opened the door and we went in all we saw was an elderly man with bushy black hair. Even though he was about fifty he still looked full of pep. He was sitting on a table, shouting into a telephone:

"You're ruining my shooting schedule! What'd you promise me yesterday? You promised me it'd be sunny and fair. No rain! And what've we got? What'd you give me? Look out the window!" He pointed at the window. "D'you have a window there? Well, look out of it! Rain! Nothing but rain! A sky full of rain! And no let-up!"

Sure enough, the sky suddenly became gray. It was beginning to drizzle.

"It's a darn shame," he said, hopped off the table and pumped Maxim Valerianovich's hand. "Hello! I've been giving those weathermen a piece of my mind. They think they're oracles!" He shook his finger at the phone. "If you don't know what you're talking about, at least have the decency to shut up! You know, Lenfilm Studios are snatching Yulia away tomorrow. She has her plane reservation, and I haven't been able to shoot the last scene on account of this rain. We'll have to shoot indoors again today. Everyone's ready. Come on, let's run."

"There's something these boys want to–"Maxim Valerianovich said, but "Kiss Me, My Friends!" interrupted him politely:

"Not now. Later. Please!" He pressed his hands to his breast and bowed his head. "After the shooting's over. We'll see to everything after that. The shooting is first on the agenda. Come, let's hurry. You, too, boys. You're both invited. But you'll have to be very still. Not a peep out of you or– You understand."

"Indeed," Maxim Valerianovich said and smiled at us. "Come along. I'm sure you've never been on a set before. You'll find it most interesting. What d'you say?"

We didn't have to be asked twice. Valya clapped her hands. "That's great!" she said. Java looked at her proudly. When you came to think of it, she was only at the studio now on account of us, and here she was, about to see the making of a movie. That's something she'd never've seen otherwise, even though she did live in Kiev.

We started down the long corridor again. As I walked along, I was saying to myself: "They sure have a lousy weather bureau here. They don't even know when it's going to rain. Why, back home any old lady'll tell you if it's going to rain or not. There's so many signs. The way the wind's blowing: into the house, or out of the house, or how the chickens are behaving, or how the sun sets. Sometimes they can tell by just looking at the trees. What those weathermen need here are some chickens for their weather bureau. That'd end all their troubles. Then they wouldn't foul up any shooting schedules."

We went down some steps and came into place that looked like the inside of a big factory. The ceiling was miles away, and that made us feel like midgets. We kept on walking, and walking, and walking, but didn't seem to be getting anyplace. A skinny, bald little man was hurrying towards us. His heels were making clopping noises on the cement floor. He waved and shouted when he was still far off,

"Hi, Vitya!"

"Hello, Zhenya!" "Kiss Me" said.

When we got closer old Zhenya slapped old Vitya on the back and shook Maxim Valerianovich's hand. Then he said to us, "Hi, fellows!"

We smiled at him. He probably had grandchildren by now, but here he was, talking like he and old Vitya were a couple of kids. Old Zhenya had tufts of gray hair sticking up all around his bald pate like cattails around a lake, and his face was as

wrinkled as a baked apple. The wrinkles were very strange: they spread out like rays from the corners of his eyes and made his face look like he was beaming all the time. His dark eyes were very lively. I thought he was a very nice man. He kept looking at Java and me as he'd hurried towards us, and when he'd pounded old Vitya's back and pumped Maxim Valerianovich's hand he still kept looking at us. Then, after he'd said hello, he asked old Vitya, nodding towards us,

"Whose're they?"

Vitya shrugged. He looked at Maxim Valerianovich.

"Mine," said Maxim Valerianovich and smiled.

"Members of the cast?" Zhenya asked Vitya, and Vitya shook his head. "Why didn't you say so? I need them! Look at these types! I've a crowd scene tomorrow. They're just what I'm looking for. Do me a favor, friends," he said and pressed his hands to his breast. "I beg of you! I'll send a car over for you! Tomorrow. At noon. We'll be shooting. Right here in the studio. I'll settle the matter with your parents. It'll only be for a day. Where d'you live?" He whipped out a notebook. "Oh, and bring along a few more boys," he added as he wrote down our address. "My assistant will call for you at 11:30 sharp. Fine. So long. See you tomorrow."

Not until he'd hurried off did it finally dawn on me: we were going to be in a movie! Tomorrow. TOMORROW we were going to be movie actors! The whole country, and maybe even the whole world, would get to know us. It was like a fairy-tale in which all your dreams came true. Something was bubbling up inside. I was afraid steam would come out of the top of my head when that happy feeling reached the boiling point. I looked at Java. I'd never seen such a happy, stupid smile on his face before.

"Congratulations!" said Maxim Valerianovich. "The man who asked you to come to the set tomorrow is Evgeny Mikhailovich. He's a film director. You'll be actors, as of tomorrow. The movies are a great institution, my friends."

"The most important of all the arts!" Java said.

"I'm so happy for you!" Valya piped up. She envied us. In fact, she was green with envy. I'm sure she'd never been as sorry as she was now that she wasn't born a boy.

"Next time they'll need some girls. You'll see," I said in the kind of voice you use when you're talking to babies or sick people. I was feeling very generous. Butterflies were flitting around inside of me.

We turned left and went through a little door. Now we were in a big, dark room. We zig-zagged and stumbled by partitions and dark objects, and stepped over thick rubber hoses. At last we came to a brightly-lit space. Golly! There was a real airplane there. Actually, it was only part of a plane, the front section of a TU-104 sliced down the middle, but everything in it was just like a real plane. The seats, and the round windows, and everything else. The shooting hadn't started yet. Meanwhile, the passengers, the stewardess and the pilots were walking around the set. Men in overalls were working near some huge spotlights. There were rails laid across the floor the whole length of the plane. A young man in a plaid shirt was pushing a dolly with a camera mounted on it along the rails. Another man had his eye pressed to the camera.

"Cut No.4!" he shouted as we came up.

There was a loud click. A spotlight that was mounted on a bridge high over our heads went off.

Just think: there was even a plane! (As if they all knew I was going to be a pilot.) I was so excited I was nearly jumping. Everything was so strange here and so wonderful. We felt like we were at a double birthday party with everybody ready to take their seats and us at the head of the table. In a few minutes now it'd all begin. They'd begin shooting a MOVIE.

"Where's Vasya?" "Kiss Me" said. "Is he late again? Well, we'll just have to sit back and wait." He sank down on a chair and leaned his elbows on his knees. His face looked grim.

A few seconds later a young man wearing a pilot's uniform dashed out of the dark. "I'm sorry everybody! My watch stopped. I forgot to wind it. I'm sorry," he said.

"So did I," I said to myself. "I forgot to wind the actor's watch. A watch should be wound regularly. Pa winds his every day. It might break down if you don't wind it regularly." I stuck my hand into my pocket. I had a funny feeling, like the huge spotlight was trained right on me. I felt sick.

There was nothing in my pocket.

Chapter 10

WHERE'S THE WATCH?
WE HEAD INTO ENEMY TERRITORY

"They're going to start now!" Java whispered. "Doesn't that tall guy in the cap look just like Phillipov?"

"Java..." I said in a voice that sounded dead and like it was coming from far away, maybe even from some distant planet.

"Maybe he really is Phillipov. Maybe we can get introduced to him. We could go over to him and say: 'How d'you do? We're going to be in this movie tomorrow, too. Maybe you could give us a few tips.'"

"Java!"

"The boys back home'll die of envy! Golly, this sure is a stroke of luck. It sure is."

"Java!"

"I told you we'd be actors. And all you ever said was: 'I'm going to be a pilot'."

I grabbed his arm and dragged him off into the dark space behind one of the partitions.

"What's the matter?" He was trying to yank his arm away.

"The watch."

"Huh?"

"It's gone."

"What?"

"The watch is gone."

"Where–"

"It was in my pocket, and it's gone now." I turned my

pockets out, even though it was dark and he couldn't see a thing.

Java was too stunned to speak.

"Now, after they're through shooting for today, they'll find the actor and–" I was frantic.

"You lost it when you were fighting. That's when. It fell out of your pocket when you were rolling around in the dust. Come on! We can look for it while they're shooting. I'll call Valya." He slipped through the small crowd of people and whispered in Valya's ear. Her lips formed a circle when she said: "Oh!"

They were back beside me in a flash. We began picking our way towards the exit, trying not to attract any attention. Actually, there was such an uproar going on behind us on the set that nobody would have noticed anyway. A fat lady wearing a white smock was the only one who did notice us, but she misunderstood, because she tiptoed over and whispered, "The second door on the left is the ladies' room, and the third door is the men's room."

We felt awfully embarrassed, but we didn't say anything.

I never ran such a race against myself in my life. I felt I was two people: the first was running like mad, and the second was trying to keep up.

We sped down the down escalator in the Metro, though the PA system kept blaring: "No running on the escalators!" Then, when we reached Arsenalnaya Station, we raced up the up escalator so fast I thought my heart would burst. When we boarded a trolleybus we began crawling along so slowly that my one wish was to get off and run on ahead of it. We dashed down the hill past the old church like we were flying. Our feet barely touched the ground.

At last. Here it was. That awful place. We all got down on our hands and knees and began crawling around. The prickly

boxthorn scratched our faces. It got tangled in our hair. It tried to get at our eyes. The actor's watch wasn't there. You can laugh if you want to, but I even pressed my ear to the ground to see if I could hear it ticking (that's how sappers use a mine sweeper). There was no ticking. For a moment I thought I heard the Earth's heart thumping below me, but it was only my own heart thumping.

"This is where you tripped him up," Java said. He was crawling around nearby. "This is where you rolled around. This is where you sat on him. This is where that skinny kid pulled you off."

I sat up, feeling that my body'd suddenly gone limp. "Java," I said blankly. "He swiped it when he was pulling me off Budka. I'm positive I felt a hand in my pocket, but I didn't think–"

Java and Valya both sat down on the ground. There we sat, looking at each other and saying nothing. Things were going from bad to worse. If I'd been an unwilling sort of thief up till then (since I hadn't stolen the watch, and I wanted to return it,

and, what was most important, I was able to return it), everything had changed now: I couldn't return it. I hadn't stolen it, but since the owner didn't have his watch on account of me, and since I was responsible for it, I was legally a thief, no matter which way you looked at it.

"Let's find Budka!" Valya said and jumped up.

I sighed hopelessly and looked at her as if she was a baby. Couldn't she see it was no use? Say we'd find Budka and tell him to give it back. He'd only sneer at us. He'd say he didn't know what we were talking about. We could never prove his pal had swiped it. Did she actually expect my sworn enemy to be kind and helpful after I'd knocked him flat and disgraced him? She sure was a baby.

"Let's find Budka!" Valya repeated. "If you're not coming with me, I'll go by myself."

"We're coming," Java mumbled. He got up and glanced at me.

"Ah," I said hopelessly, but I got up anyway (I didn't want them to think I was scared).

We went down the path in single file: Valya leading the way (she was convinced we'd get the watch back), then Java (he wanted to believe we would for her sake) and me bringing up the rear (I didn't have any hope at all).

We were heading into enemy territory. I felt like an army scout being parachuted behind enemy lines. I wasn't scared of getting hit, I just didn't want to get hit for nothing.

"D'you know where he is?" Java asked.

"He's either behind the sheds where they hang out, or playing soccer, or home. I know where he lives," Valya said.

There was nobody behind the sheds and nobody on the soccer field.

"Let's go to his house. We'll tell his mother that we're going to report him to the militia, and he'll be arrested as a juvenile delinquent!" Valya said.

"There he is!" Java shouted.

Budka had just come out of Valya's house. We ran towards him, but he didn't look like he was going to run away. I even thought he was glad to see us.

"Where's the watch?" Valya said.

"In the first place, why don't you say hello?" Budka said with a nasty smile. "Such bad manners. Didn't your mamas teach you any manners?"

"Quit stalling! Where's the watch?" Java demanded, thrusting out his chin.

"My, don't you look scary! I'm going to cry! Don't scare me like that!" Budka taunted.

"Where's the watch?" Java repeated.

"What watch?" Budka asked innocently.

"The one your pal pulled out of his pocket!" Valya shouted, pointing at me.

"A gold-plated one? With a black dial?"

"Yes!" I cried.

"Nope. I didn't see it." Budka shook his head sadly.

"You louse!" Valya screamed.

"Don't scream at me. I'm very high-strung. My own mother never shouts at me."

"I knew it. And we've no proof," I said to myself. Aloud I said, "Give back the watch or–" I stopped short, because I really didn't know what to say.

"Would you like it gift-wrapped?"

"All right," Valya hissed. "If you don't want to give it back, we'll go to your mother. We'll go to the militia. If you're a thief, if you steal things–you'll be arrested! Come on, boys," she said.

"Don't you think you're smart! Threatening me. Ha! You try to prove we stole it. Go on, prove it!"

"And I will! I will too!"

"No, you won't. Now, if you were more polite, I might even help you. I just might know a thing or two."

"What d'you know?" we all asked together.

"Well, I know that I didn't swipe it, because my hands–he-he–were busy doing something else. Weren't they?" he said and looked at me with a smile.

"So?" I felt my face getting red when I thought of him banging my head on the ground. True enough, his hands had been busy doing something else.

"But I know who swiped it. There's this guy... He's not a member of our gang. He was just passing by. He's been in jail before, and...."

I'd had it. If Budka wasn't lying, a real thief had stolen the watch.

"So?" I said, feeling a chill run down my spine.

"So what? That's the last you've seen of your watch. But the guys in my gang aren't criminals. We don't like crooks, and since it happened on our hunting grounds, we decided to straighten out the record. It won't be easy, though. He's gone off with it. Now let's get things clear. If you want to know, I was even looking for you. I've just been to her place," he nodded at Valya.

"So?"

"The gang'll be at the stadium today. We'll be waiting for you guys on the corner near the Theatre of Musical Comedy half an hour before the game. We got two tickets for you. I'm in a hurry. *Ciao!*" he said and trotted off.

We looked at each other. It was all so strange. We could've expected anything, but not this. Budka and his pals acting like knights in shining armor and fighting crime? The whole thing sounded fishy. But why should they want to trick us? We really had no proof that they'd swiped the watch. And there was no

way we could get it back. But now, since he just admitted it, we could report it to the militia. Which meant Budka wasn't fooling. They really wanted to help us.

We had an emergency meeting right there and then and decided that Java and I'd meet the enemy, while Valya'd race back to the set and tell Maxim Valerianovich about what'd happened. Why, he didn't even know where we were! Meanwhile, since the soccer game was still a long way off, Java and I'd go home and have dinner.

My uncle was beaming when he opened the door. "Do I have a surprise for you kids!" he said. "Guess where we're going today? Give up? To the soccer match of the season! The Kiev Dynamo's playing the Moscow Torpedo. It's the National Cup game! I see you look dazed. No wonder. You'll never see anything like it in Vasukovka. Maybe you don't feel it's a treat? Hm? Maybe you don't want to go? Eh?"

"You're a soccer fan, so it's a great event in your life, but they're normal children," my aunt said. "Aren't I right, boys?"

"Every normal person enjoys a soccer game," Uncle Grisha said.

"Sure, it's great... What a surprise!" I finally mumbled.

"We've got the best seats. They're in Section A," my uncle proudly produced the tickets.

"Golly!" I said.

In the time that remained before dinner, and all through dinner, and after dinner I kept racking my brains, trying to figure out a way that would get us to the game on our own, minus my uncle. On the one hand, we needed the tickets badly (so's not to be indebted to our enemies); on the other hand, Uncle Grisha was what we didn't need, because he'd surely mess everything up by just being there. I hung around him like a bee near a honey pot and finally said, "Could you give us our tickets now? Then we could go early."

"Why don't you want to go with me?"

"Uh... We're going to meet somebody..." I stopped and stared at the floor.

Uncle Grisha looked at us, smiled and winked. "I see. Indeed. But don't you think it's a bit early to start dating, boys?"

We decided it was best not to answer.

"Well, do as you wish. Here are the tickets. But be careful. The crowds are terrible."

Chapter 11

THE KIEV DYNAMO PLAYS THE MOSCOW TORPEDO

The trolleybus was about to pull away from the stop. We just made it. The doors closed behind us, and we were off. It was very crowded inside. We were standing on the bottom step with our faces pressed against the back of someone's knees. While we were trying to squirm around and get some air the driver announced: "Ivan Kudry Street." The trolleybus stopped. The doors opened. We were sure we'd topple out, but no! There was such a crowd rushing in that it lifted us off our feet and stuffed us back inside. Other people's bodies were crushed against us, squeezing us upward until our feet were off the floor. I'd rather walk any day than ride like that.

Despite the crush, everyone looked excited. Strangers were talking to each other, and by the way they were saying: "We'll murder the Torpedo!", "I hope they don't murder us", and "Bazilevich'll score at least three goals!" we realized that most of them were going to the game.

We were carried out of the trolleybus at one of the stops and became

a part of the human stream that was flowing towards the Central Stadium. We began working our way to the Theatre of Musical Comedy, wondering why everyone was in such a mad rush when there was still forty minutes till the game began. Looking at all those people rushing and shoving, you'd think it'd already begun. We were ten minutes early and thought we'd have to wait for Budka and his pals, but I heard a loud whistle and Budka shouted,

"There they are!"

Soon his gang was crowding around us. Their faces weren't mean now. They looked curious.

"Here," Budka said, rummaging around in his pocket. "Here's your tickets. No, they won't cost you anything. It's on the house," he said and held up his hand, though we'd no intention of paying him. He'd probably rehearsed the scene. He was showing us how noble he was.

"No, thanks," I said politely. "We've already got tickets." I fished them out of my pocket.

One of the kids snickered. Budka looked disappointed, but he wasn't giving in that easily.

"Let's see' em. They're probably just passes to get in. Hm... Section A. Well, that's different. Well, that's just fine. I'll sell mine." And he shouted: "Anybody want two tickets?"

The moment he said that he disappeared. He was attacked by a crowd of eager fans, those miserable, unhappy-looking people we'd seen lining the sidewalk all the way from the bus stop to the stadium. They'd all been wailing:

"Anybody have an extra ticket?"

All of us who had tickets passed them proudly, jostling them and stepping on their feet.

A moment later Budka reappeared. He was so crumpled and disheveled you'd think he'd been beaten up. "Selling an extra ticket here is like diving under a steam roller," he said with a crooked smile. "Come on! We don't want anyone to take our seats," he added.

"But when– When'll we talk about you-know-what?" I asked.

"Later. After the game. We'll meet right here again."

It was no use arguing.

I think it's easier to sneak across the border of some country than sneak into the Central Stadium in Kiev without a ticket. Our tickets were checked at least five times before we finally got to our seats.

The players were warming up as we sat down. They were kicking balls at the goalies, and each player had a least one ball to himself. The poor goalies were hopping around like mad and missing a lot of the balls.

Then my uncle showed up. When we moved over to make room for him he looked at us slyly and winked again. We lowered our eyes. He could think whatever he wanted to.

A few minutes later the players left the field. After a while three men appeared: the one in the middle was carrying a ball, and the ones on either side of him were each carrying a little flag. These were the referees.

The chief umpire set the ball down in the middle of the field and blew his whistle. The two teams came trotting out from an entrance under the main section. They lined up opposite each other and then greeted each other. Then some fans came running out with bouquets of flowers for their favourite players, but the players tossed the bouquets to the news photographers who were sitting nearby on a bench (what was the use of giving

the players the flowers?). Then the chief umpire blew his whistle again, and the game began.

"Hey-y-y!"

"Come on, Kaneva!"

"Ahh!"

"Come on, Serebro!"

"Ohhh!"

"Pass to Basil!"

"Ohhh!"

"Pass it to Biba!"

"Ahhh!"

The great bowl of the stadium was like a boiling kettle. It seemed like steam was rising in clouds over it. The man sitting next to us was either a university professor or a circus performer. On the one hand, he looked just like a professor: he had an intelligent face, a small beard, wore glasses and had a briefcase on his lap. On the other hand, he was just like a circus performer. He kept jumping up, bleating, whistling and whinnying like a horse. Whenever the Kiev Dynamo scored he'd toss his briefcase into the air and catch it with one hand. Not every juggler could do that! The circus professor couldn't keep still for a minute. Whenever one of his home team players broke free with the ball he'd egg him on and shriek, "Come on, come on, come on!" in such a terrible voice you'd think he was shouting: "Help! Murder!" He'd keep it up until someone intercepted the ball. Then he'd wave his hands in disgust and shout, "I knew it! You should've passed! You should've passed it to Basil!" And he'd latch his eyes onto some other player and shout, "You think you've been put out to pasture? Run, man, run! You're a player, not a cow!" You'd think the poor, panting player didn't even have a right to catch his breath!

The woman beside him was probably his wife. She was fat and had on a hat she'd made out of a newspaper. She was worrying about the game in silence, but she was breathing so hard and so loud I thought she was using up all the air there was in the stadium. The circus professor kept saying, "Don't worry, sweetie! Don't worry! It'll all end well. Our team'll win."

Java winked at me and said, "That's the sourest-looking sweetie I ever saw."

"She sure is," I grinned.

We looked away from the circus professor and his sweetie, because the game was so interesting we couldn't waste any more time on them. We'd become a tiny part of a huge creature called "The Stadium" which was shaking like it had a fever. And when the referee unfairly (so the Stadium decided) didn't rule a penalty kick to the Dynamos, we joined the crowd in howling and yelling at the tops of our voices:

"Kill the referee! Kill the referee!" You'd think we were all murderers.

Soccer's a great game. It's good for when you're feeling bad or for when you're in trouble. At any rate, I forgot all about my troubles and didn't think of them till the game was over. Then it was time to get rid of Uncle Grisha again.

"You go on home. We still have to see about something," I said. You'd think we were the grown-ups and he was the kid!

"You be careful about that something," Uncle Grisha said. "You're too young to be having dates. You don't want your girlfriends' fathers to box your ears."

But since Kiev won (3:2), my uncle was feeling great and let us go.

This time we had to wait. We waited for about ten minutes, or even more, and it wasn't easy, because it wasn't just waiting. We were fighting. Fighting the human river that was rushing past us, trying to carry us off and toss us out on some other street. It wasn't easy to stand our ground. At last the kids showed up.

"Come on," Budka said.

We entered the stream and were carried off with the current.

"Well?" I said impatiently, steering over to Budka.

"Wait. Not here."

He sure was dragging it out! We came ashore on a side street and ducked into a connecting yard. Here, in a dark archway, Budka stopped. Looking back over his shoulder, he said in a mysterious voice,

"It's like this. We had a talk with him. We had a hard time making him come around. They'll tell you."

"We sure did!"

"You bet!" his pals said.

"He said he'd give it back, but only at night. Tonight. Tomorrow'll be too late, because he's getting out of Kiev tomorrow. The militia's after him."

"So?"

"It's all set. He's got it stashed away in a safe place. In a cave near the monastery. We can't go there in the daytime, because somebody might see us. Anyway, we're to meet at midnight near the old church. Near Kaisarov's grave. Know where it is?"

Java and I looked at each other. Were they fooling us? If so, why? Just for the neck of it? What were we to do? What could we do?

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"You're not yellow, are you?" Budka said. He looked at us scornfully. "It's up to you. It's your watch. It's no skin off my nose. We're not going if you're not."

"All right. We'll be there," I said. I might've thought twice if it was my watch, but it wasn't. I had no choice.

"See you soon," Budka said cheerfully. "And don't sleep through till the morning."

Chapter 12

THE COSSACKS WILL LIVE ON. KARAFOLKA THE CHIEFTAIN. THE LETTER OF THE ZAPOROZHIAN COSSACKS. A NIGHT AT THE CEMETERY (RECOLLECTIONS)

It was a little past ten p. m. We were lying on the big couch by the open balcony door, pretending we were asleep, waiting for my aunt and uncle to fall asleep so's we could slip away. There's probably no more awful kind of waiting than lying in bed, wide awake and afraid to move. Waiting, and not knowing what awaits you, knowing you have to get up at midnight and head through the darkness to a place full of old graves.

I kept remembering the past. That made me still more scared.

I'm no magician and can't read anybody's mind, but I was ready to bet anything Java was thinking about the same things I was. I'd bet anything in the world he was. He couldn't possibly be thinking of anything else. It'd all happened at night, too. And at a cemetery, too. My throat had gone dry then, too, and my heart had frozen, and my feet had felt numb.

It had all happened last September, after we'd returned from the desert island. A group of archeologists had descended on Vasukovka. Actually, it wasn't all that unexpected, because we knew two of the men. They were hunters from Kiev who came to Vasukovka every year. We used to catch grasshoppers for them for bait when they went fishing, and we always felt superior, like we did towards all city people who looked so out of place in the country. We'd grin when they groaned, as they got up at dawn to go hunting, or when they turned over in our boats in the marsh, or when they cleaned fish and pricked their fingers on the fins.

We never imagined they knew so many interesting things.

They used to come to Vasukovka to go hunting and never thought about diggings or archeology. They were on vacation

and having a good time. But one evening when they were sitting around a campfire, waiting for the millet to cook, they began talking about archeology. Grandpa Varava and Grandpa Salivon were with them there, and a few minutes later the hunters forgot all about the millet, the hunt and everything else. The very next day they went back to Kiev, even though they were both still on vacation and were supposed to stay a whole month. Soon they were back again with an expedition.

We discovered that our region was very historic and that our village was extremely historic and very ancient. We always knew it was ancient, but we never thought it was historic, too. Well, Vasukovka was one of the stopping points on the Route from the Vikings to the Greeks (Java and I'd both gotten D's for that chapter in history). It was also at the crossroads of the Zaporozhian Cossack campaigns.

We found out that such historical personages as Vladimir Monomakh, Princess Olga and Bogdan Khmelnitsky had all stopped to rest in the shade of the old oak tree just outside the village.

We gaped as we listened to the archeologists' stories about Zaporozhian Sech and Ivan Sirko, the legendary Cossack chieftain who was re-elected to his post fifteen times in a row, something no other man in the history of the Zaporozhian Sech had achieved. His enemies feared Ivan Sirko more than anything else in the world. The archeologists told us all about Pyotr Kalnishevsky, the last of the Cossack chieftains, whom Catherine the Great exiled to Solovetsky Monastery. He spent twenty-five years in a deep, cold, damp pit, but did not submit, did not denounce the Cossacks and despite his terrible suffering lived for one hundred and twelve years! Such was his mighty constitution.

We hung on their every word. We'd never dreamed our ancestors were such men!

That very same day the expedition began its diggings at the side of a Cossack burial mound in the steppe, about two kilo-

metres from the village. Naturally, all my pals hung around there till dark. We were so excited we nearly tumbled into the trench when the archeologists dug up some Cossack arms (a sword and a pistol), a cut glass vodka bottle (so what if it was empty?) and a wooden pipe inlaid with pearls on the bowl. We'd never forget that day. First the archeologists broke up the ground with crowbars. Then they picked away the clods of earth by hand. Then, whenever their fingers felt something, they brushed away the dirt with special little brushes. We were spellbound. Here they were, picking things out of the ground that'd been buried for over three hundred years!

The archeologists said one of Ivan Sirko's commanders had been buried under the mound, because Sirko'd made camp here on his way back from the Crimea after defeating the Crimean Khan near Sivash. They said one of Sirko's comrades-in-arms had probably died of his wounds and been buried here. According to the custom of Zaporozhian Sech, a Cossack's arms, his pipe and a bottle of vodka (to make him happy in the next world) were always placed beside him in his grave.

We kept staring at a pistol and a sword. The sword had an ivory hilt, and the scabbard was inlaid with silver.

Java sighed. "If we had only known about them, we'd have dug them up ourselves," he whispered to me.

The expedition also began digging by the old oak tree. All they found there was a rusty old tankard, but they said they thought it might've belonged to Ivan Sirko.

Then they began calling on all the old men and women in Vasukovka, asking them about the legends and stories they'd heard in their youth. They also wanted to know which of them were descendants of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. The archeologists spent a long time talking to Granny Trindichka who was a hundred and seven years old.

"Can you tell us about your father and grandfather?" the short, fat archeologist named Sidorenko (the one who'd dropped his gun in the water in the marsh) asked her.

"Yes, I had a father and a grandfather, sonny," Trindichka said, nodding and smiling.

"What was their occupation?"

"Yes, yes," she went on nodding happily.

"Were they just peasants? Did they sow buckwheat?"

"Yes," Granny Trindichka nodded.

"So they sowed buckwheat?" Sidorenko said. He sounded disappointed.

"Yes, they sowed buckwheat. That they did," Granny Trindichka said and nodded. "And millet, and oats, and poppies in the front garden."

It was no use talking to her.

Then the expedition went searching for all the old cottages, the ones that had thatched roofs, were half-sunk into the ground and had moss growing on them. There were just a few of them. The archeologists didn't miss a nook or a cranny in those cottages. We had a very sudden and unpleasant surprise when they were examining the Karafolkas' house. Sidorenko suddenly yelped so excitedly you'd've thought he'd found a pot of gold. What he did find was an inscription on one of the rafters. It'd been covered over with whitewash, but he'd scraped it off. This is what it said: "Gavrila Karafolka, a Cossack of the Titarov Troop, completed this cottage on April 10, 1748".

"Look! Look!" Sidorenko kept shouting. "This is living history! It's untouched relic. Take care of this house you live in! Take very good care of it. We're putting it in the records. It's unique."

Karafolka's family were very pleased, because they'd never dreamed they were living in such a famous relic. That same day we found out that Grandpa Salivon was a great-great-grandson of a Zaporozhian Cossack lieutenant and that Ivan Shapka, the collective farm chairman, was a descendant of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, too. So was our teacher, Galina Sidorovna.

The villagers have always respected the old folks, but they were never as popular as they were now. They kept talking

away all day, remembering what they knew about their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. To hear them tell it, all those grannies were the greatest of beauties, and all those grandfathers were the strongest men ever: this had wrestled a bull and won; that one had lifted a wagonload of potatoes; another had pulled up an oak tree. Not a single Vasukovka villager had any ancestors who were skinny, cross-eyed, hunchbacked or bow-legged. The only difference about their ancestors was that half of the beauties and strong men were of Cossack descent and the other half were of peasant stock, but there was nothing they could do about that, because you didn't chose your ancestors, you were just stuck with what you had. Kuzma Barillo was of Cossack descent, and so was Vasya Dergach, and so was Ganya Grebeniuchka, while we ... The worst of it all, the thing that nearly killed us, was that Stepan Karafolka, the class monitor, honour pupil and goody-goody who was set up as an example to us every single day of our lives and whom we hated like poison because of that, well Stepan Karafolka, who looked like a sissy if there ever was one, was a direct descendant of a glorious Cossack of Zaporozhian Sech, while we ... I, at least, had a lone Cossack vagabond among one of my mother's very, very distant relatives, but Java had not a one. Nothing but buckwheat-somers all the way down the line.

"Wasn't there even a single Zaporozhian Cossack in our family anyplace, Grandpa?" Java said hopefully.

"Nope. Not that I know of," Grandpa Varava replied.

"See?" Java said crossly and turned away. (You'd think it was his grandfather's fault.)

"Silly," Grandpa Varava said. "Where'd all those fine Cossacks have been if there hadn't been any buckwheat-sowers? In their graves, that's where. Who would've fed them? They'd have all starved to death. And if an enemy attacked, the buckwheat sowers took up their scythes and pitchforks and went off to battle the foe no worse'n the Cossacks."

Nothing his grandfather said had any effect on Java. He muttered, "Sure, but you could've at least married a grandma of Cossack descent for me." And he stalked off.

"All they kept talking about was a new house! You'd think something would've happened to them if they had gone on living in our old house for a while," Java seethed as he glared at their brand-new house. "Maybe there was something written on one of the old rafters, too. Grandpa's old and he knows a lot, but there's an awful lot that he's forgotten."

Java wouldn't take it lying down. He was really suffering, especially since Karafolka was now strutting around, spitting through his teeth in our direction whenever he passed us (he wouldn't dare say anything out loud, 'cause he knew we'd knock his block off, famous ancestor or no). Still, we might've ignored his stuck-up nose and spitting through his teeth, but he got to us in another way. He started up a game of Zaporozhian Cossacks on the meadow. His army was made up of descendants only, and Karafolka was unanimously elected the chieftain. He strutted around in front of his men, led them into battle, organized Cossack revels and contests. When Karafolka went out to play Cossacks he'd put on an embroidered shirt, a pair of wide, loose crimson trousers which were a part of his brother's folk-dancing costume. He also wore his grandfather's lambskin hat. It'd been lying around in the chicken coop for so long and was so old that even the hens hated to lay eggs in it.

We sat in the bushes listening to the merry Cossack songs rising over the meadow:

It's do or die, men, and you can't die twice!
Ho, men, mount your horses!
He who rides off to battle rides off to glory!

We ground our teeth. We'd never felt so left out, miserable and insulted in all our lives. It was us, Java and me, who were full of fire and spirit! It was us who should've been the Cossack chieftains! Java and me, not goody-goody Karafolka. Ah, what

wouldn't we give to sock him in his snooty puss! But how could we get even?

"Listen, Java! Remember the *Letter of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan*?"

"Huh? So what?"

"Let's write them a letter like it."

"How can we? They're the Zaporozhian Cossacks!"

"They are not! Look at them! You know who they are? They're a bunch of fakes, that's what. So what if they had some famous ancestors? That's just what we'll say. We'll say: your ancestors were great, but you're a bunch of nobodys. The letter's printed on one of my books. We'll change it around a little, and it'll be swell!"

"Come on!"

We stopped off at my house for the book and then went on to Java's. He had a print of a painting by Ilya Repin hanging over his desk. It was a picture of the Zaporozhian Cossacks writing their famous letter to the Turkish Sultan. We sat down under the picture. We could see how happy those Cossacks were and what fun they were having writing the letter. So we began on our own. It was murder.

After sweating over it for hours we finally finished our masterpiece. We put a title on it: "The Letter of the Real Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Fake Chieftan, the Snotty Honor Pupil Karafolka, and to his Rageddy Army". This was what we'd written:

> *You're a stupid fool, the brother and comrade of the accursed devil, and secretary to Lucifer himself! What kind of a knight are you? What kind of a Zaporozhian are you, and a chieftain besides? You're a stuttering sissy! The hole of a ring! A burr on a bog's tail! A patch on a pair of torn pants, a scrap of half-chewed honor pupil! We're not afraid of your mangy army! We'll fight you to the end, through fire and water! You're no Cossack! You should be out playing dolls with babies! You're not even worth our wasting our breath on you, and we hope a spotted cow swallows you hole! You've sawdust in your head instead of brains, you scarecrow! Take that, you*

idiot! You can kiss our craked and dirty heels, because you're brother to a pig!

It was all in capital letters on the reverse side of a long piece of wallpaper left over after Java's new house'd been papered. We tied a piece of string to one of the bottom corners and attached a dried pancake of cow dung to it for a seal. It looked terrific. Then we marched off to the meadow, booming out a march on the way and solemnly handed Karafolka our "Parchment". We were sure that after the kids read our letter they'd never look up to Karafolka again. He'd be a perfect nobody.

Later that day we received a polite reply:

Dear friends,

It was very clever of you to think up all those names for me. The only reason you did it is because you're sorry you're not of Cossack descent. We can understand that. We read your letter with pleasure and agree to enlist you in our Cossack Army as scribes, even though you're no good at spelling.

By the way, "whole" starts with a "w" and "cracked" has a "c" in it.

Sincerely,
On behalf of the glorious
Zaporozhian Army,
Stepan Karafolka, Chieftain

This was worse than if he'd knocked us over in a wrestling match. We tried not to look at each other. It was our worst defeat. What would our pals in Vasukovka say now? We had to do something about it. If things went on like this, why, before you knew it snot-nosed little first-graders would be snubbing us.

"If we had a real Cossack sword ... or a pistol like the one the archeologists found, Karafolka wouldn't be chieftain any more," I said. "Right! A sword, or a pistol. Why, we'd– Boy! We'd be the chieftains if we had a real Cossack sword," Java said.

"Where'll we get them?" It was hopeless when you got down to it.

"We'll dig them up!"

"Where? You think they're just lying around, waiting to be dug up? There was that Cossack burial mound, but now they've gone and dug it up. It's all used up."

"What about the cemetery?"

"The what?"

"You dope! I didn't say we're going to dig up fresh graves, did I? Are you ever stupid! You know the old graves over at the edge by the road? The ones that don't have any crosses on them. The ones that're just little grassy bumps on the ground. How long d'you think they've been there? Two hundred years at least. Grandpa Salivon once said his great-grandfather was buried there. You know who he was? A Cossack from Zaporozhian Sech. And you know how they were buried? With their weapons. So figure it out."

"Yeh, sure, but still... It's a cemetery. And it's full of corpses."

"What're you talking about? All that's left is a skull and a couple of crossbones. You saw what the archeologists dug up. There can't be much left of him if he's been lying around in the ground for two hundred years. Wait till you see what's left of you in two hundred years."

"But... Even if it's just a skull... Still, it's..."

"We won't touch it," Java snapped. "We'll just dig up the pistol and sword. Then we'll fill the grave in again. Nobody'll ever notice."

"Shouldn't we ask Grandpa Salivon for permission?"

"It's not his property. It's not like digging potatoes in his garden. And anyway, what'll you say? 'Can we dig up your great-grandfather?' Won't that sound great?"

"When'll we go? Let's go in the daytime."

"If we start digging when it's light, somebody might see us. We'll be in plenty of trouble then."

"When do we go?"

"At night."

"What?"

"You scared?"

"No, but..."

"Aren't you smart! You want to get a real Cossack pistol and sword, but you don't want to go to any trouble, you want to get them as easy as if you'd be buying them in store."

"All right. I'll go."

Were you ever in a cemetery at night? If not, don't go. It's scary. It's so scary it makes your hair stand on end. I know all about it now, but then... I didn't dare let Java see I was scared when he was acting like he was going to the movies. You'd never guess he was on his way to a cemetery in the middle of the night.

"You know who invented the story about cemeteries being spooky places? Cry-babies, that's who." He sounded very cheerful. "What's there to be scared of? Huh? If you want to be scared of somebody, you might as well be scared of somebody who's alive, not somebody who's dead. Dead people can't hurt you. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn went to a cemetery at night, too. And nothing happened to them."

"That's what you say. What about Indian Joe? He killed the doctor there, remember? And they saw him do it."

"So what? He didn't kill them, did he?" Java'd forgotten the part about Indian Joe. "Why don't you just say you're scared?"

"What's there to be scared of?" I was trying to keep my voice from sounding squeaky. Now why did I have to remember that part about Indian Joe murdering the doctor?

We passed the last cottage on the street and headed out of the village towards the cemetery. The crosses were black against the cloudy sky. The moon kept disappearing behind the clouds. It was only lighting up the road in snatches. Behind us in the dark the village was fast asleep. Not a single dog was barking.

There was a small wood off to the left beyond the cemetery. To the right there was nothing but steppe as far as the horizon. We began picking our way across the cemetery, keeping our eyes on the ground so's not to see the graves. We each had a shovel. I'd also brought along a shoebrush (we couldn't get any of the special kind the archeologists used), and Java had the mechanical flashlight I'd given him.

The leaves on the trees rustled. A dry branch was creaking. It sounded as if somebody with a squeaking artificial leg was clumping along beside us in the dark. I suddenly remembered that Petya Peshko's great-grandmother'd been buried here a couple of months ago. People don't often die in Vasukovka, and when they do the whole village goes to the funeral. I remembered her face: it was all wrinkled, and she looked like she was smiling to herself. That's when I thought of her, lying someplace real close, in a coffin under the ground. Right now she was opening her eyes and beginning to move. She was trying to get up. I'd heard someone say that sometimes people who're in a kind of a death-like sleep are buried by mistake, and then they come to after they're buried, and then... I could feel my hair standing on end.

I couldn't breathe. *Zipp*! *Zipp*! Was that her making that sound?

No, it was only Java, pumping away on the flashlight. "It's someplace here," he whispered and shined the light on a little bump in the tall grass. It was a grave.

"D-d-don't *zipp* it like th-that! L-let's d-dig in the d-dark."

Java'd probably realized by now that a cemetery was no place to be shining a flashlight. He stuck it back into his pocket. We stood there for a couple of minutes, listening. Then we raised our shovels, stuck them into the ground together and drove them in.

All of a sudden– We froze. Two big green eyes were staring at us out of the dark. They were right on top of the grave. Sticking up over the eyes were– a pair of horns. And then (it gives

me goose pimples to even think of it) we heard a terrible, inhuman scream. I'd never heard anything like that scream in my life. The very next moment –

"*A-a-agh*!"

I don't remember who screamed first, Java or I, but I know as sure as anything that we were both screaming. We didn't run, we flew. I don't even think our feet touched the ground. In all the centuries since Vasukovka was founded nobody from the village'd ever run that fast. We burst into Java's yard (it was closer), slammed the gate and jammed a stick of firewood against it just in case.

It may sound funny, but we spent the rest of the night in a dog kennel pressed close to Ryabka, Java's big dog. Ryabka's such a mean customer he could kill the devil himself if he wanted to. Even though we sneered at ourselves the next morning, saying that we were the world's biggest clunks, because all we'd seen was a plain, ordinary cat (cats sometimes yowl like that), even so, we weren't setting out for any cemetery at night again. We sneaked back for our shovels the next day and never breathed a word about our outing to anyone.

Soon the autumn rains set in. Then it was winter, and the game of Cossacks on the meadow was forgotten. Java and I

made an ice-scooter out of an old three-wheeler, and we were back in the saddle again.

After that night at the cemetery I said to myself, "You're never going to go to a cemetery at night again, Pavel. You're going to be a pilot, but you never will if you have a nervous tic or a stutter, and you will have one as sure as anything if you go there again. That's something your enemies can do if they want to. They can twitch and stutter if they want to."

And here I was, less than a year later, getting ready to go to a cemetery at night again. This time, even though it made me sick just to remember that night in Vasukovka and the cat's green eyes, I said to myself, "You've got to go, Pavel. You'd never go, not for anything, if it was just for yourself, but it's not. You're going because you've got to return his watch. No matter what."

I could hear Java sighing beside me and knew just what he was thinking. We lay there, waiting for my aunt and uncle to fall asleep. Even though their bedroom door was shut we knew they weren't asleep yet, because it was so quiet. The moment they'd fall asleep we'd know it, and so would everybody else in the house, because it was summertime, and all the windows were open. I certainly respect my uncle and aunt. They're very nice, good, kind people. Besides, my uncle's a Master of Sports. And my aunt's cakes are better'n anything anybody ever tasted. It's not their fault if they– Shh! Wait. Sure enough! They were asleep at last. It sounded like the lion house in the Zoo. If there's ever going to be a snoring contest I know my uncle and aunt'll take all the prizes. They'll be the world champs.

We got up and began to dress. Even if someone fired a cannon at their door now they'd never hear it.

Chapter 13

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURES. THE SHOT IN THE CAVE

We went to the balcony, got out the rope we'd hidden under a box earlier, and tied it to the railing. We weren't trying to be brave and daring. By no means. We just had to get out of the house, and if we left by the front door there'd be no one to lock it behind us. The second floor wasn't very high off the ground, and anyway, we were both good at climbing.

We'd tied a lot of knots in the rope, just in case, and slid down. All the windows in the house were dark, all except two on the fifth floor that looked like the eyes of the house. We could hear music, and there were shadows flitting back and forth up there. They were probably having a party. Seeing a whole crowd of people still up and having a good time this late at night took some of the scare out of going to the cemetery.

I had my hand on Uncle Grisha's starter's pistol. Having it in my pocket made me feel braver. We'd had a long discussion about whether to take it or not and finally decided we would. Since we'd vowed never to lie again, we wrote Uncle Grisha a note and left it in the drawer instead of the pistol. This is what we wrote.

Dear Uncle Grisha,

Don't be mad. We took your pistol. We really need it. We're going on a very dangerous mission. We may never come back. If we don't, look for our bodies in the monastery vaults. We've no choice. We've got to go. It's a question of our honour. We have to return something that belongs to somebody. We don't want him to think we're thieves.

Just in case, farewell.

Pavlik, Java

P. S. Send my new suit back to my mother if I don't come back.

Java

P. S. Tell my folks to give my bike to my cousin Volodya.

Pavlik

No matter what you say, it's spooky to be going to a monastery in the middle of the night, to a place that's full of graves full of corpses. I wanted to stay near those two lighted windows, near the music and the party. But we had to hurry.

We boarded an empty trolley car. It sped off down the streets at twice the speed it did in the daytime. The bell kept jangling all the time, as if it was scared, too. We got off at the last stop and began walking towards the monastery, taking a short cut across Valya's yard. (If only she knew we were there! But she was sound asleep now.)

We turned the corner of her house and followed the winding path down through the thickets of boxthorn, lower and lower, past the old church. My heart began pounding louder and louder. There's something special about the dark that makes every bush look like it's full of big, hairy creatures that're moving their long arms and just waiting to pounce on you. Even places that're bright and sunny in the daytime seem spooky at night. So you can imagine what a cemetery, an abandoned church and underground vaults and tombs that you'd never go to in the daytime are like in the middle of the night.

All of a sudden, as if to announce our arrival, the whole world became full of ringing. One ... Two ... Three ... We stopped in our tracks, staring up at the black sky. I felt like the bell was driving icy nails into my heart. *Bong*! *Bong*! *Bong*!

"I-it's the c-clock on the monastery tower. It's striking midnight!" Java whispered.

We began walking again. Though we didn't say a word to each other, we were both trying to step as softly as we could. Soundlessly, actually. And all this just so's whoever it was that

was lying in wait for us behind every bush wouldn't hear us coming. Chills kept running up and down my spine. You'd think it was icy fingers stretching out at me from the dark and sliding down my back. I tried not to look around so's not to find myself staring into a pair of blazing green eyes.

When we'd nearly reached the gate something rustled in the bushes. Someone darted out and screamed. We crouched, held our breaths and shrivelled up. I clenched the pistol so hard it nearly went off. Luckily, the trigger was very tight. It was made for an athlete's hand. If not, I'd have certainly fired it off in my pocket, and goodbye to my new pants then.

A long minute passed. No one attacked us. "It's probably one of Budka's pals being funny," I said. We raised our heads and straightened our shoulders. "We don't want them to think we're scared," I said. "We've got to walk along, stepping lively and laughing."

But our feet just wouldn't listen to us, so we crept on again as softly as cats, across the flagstones of the vaulted courtyard, past the belfry. My laughter was stuck someplace so far down inside of me that even I couldn't hear it. But I did hear something else. It was a muffled voice. It was coming from behind General Kaisarov's tomb.

"Don't. We might as well wind it. They're not coming. They probably couldn't sneak out."

The voice sounded familiar, though it wasn't Budka's.

"Yes, we could! Here we are!" Java called out loudly. So loudly that I jumped.

"Oh!" someone exclaimed. The voice coming from behind the tombstone sounded scared. Then three heads popped up.

"Oh, it's you," Budka said, and the way he said it made me think he was disappointed, or even mad, like he'd been expecting somebody else.

They came out from their hiding place and walked over to us: Budka, a short kid I'd noticed when we'd been fighting, and

a tall, lanky guy wearing a black mask. He was probably the crook.

I shuddered. When you see somebody in a black mask at midnight in a cemetery it gives you the willies. "Golly, I sure am jumping every minute. If I don't quit soon I'll be just like a jumping-jack. I've got to get a grip on myself," I said to myself. But it wasn't all that easy to get a grip on myself!

"You got a flashlight?" Budka asked.

"No."

"Too bad."

We knew it was too bad, but it wasn't our fault. Something'd gone wrong with Java's mechanical one, and we didn't have any other. Uncle Grisha didn't have a flashlight, either. And anyway, how could we've known we'd be going to a cemetery at midnight? We had a small box of matches, though. But a small box of matches wasn't a flashlight.

"Never mind, we've got one. We'll manage." It sounded like Budka was glad we didn't have a flashlight. "Come on!" he said.

We left the monastery yard and went out through the gate in the fortress wall. A very narrow railed wooden staircase led down and away from the foot of the wall. Trees branched over the staircase, making it as black as pitch. It felt like we were going down to the middle of the earth. I was scared stiff, and I wanted those thugs to know I had a gun, and if they tried anything funny I'd... But I didn't know how to let them know I had it.

Budka and the crook lit the way with their flashlights, but those two jumping dots of light darting down the wooden steps made everything else seem still more spooky. After we got to the bottom of the stairs we began climbing again for some reason or other, but now we were going up along the bottom of the fortress wall. We climbed higher and higher, then turned right and came out on a little paved walk that led off among

some huge trees. No one said a word. I finally got up my courage to whisper to Budka, who was walking beside me, "Why's he got on a mask?"

"For secrecy," Budka whispered mysteriously. "I told you he's wanted by the militia."

"Ha," I said to myself." If you ask me, anybody who wears a black mask nowadays'll stick out like a sore thumb. If you're barefaced you can get lost in a crowd, and no militiaman'll ever notice you, but if you have on a black mask, he'll spot you right away and run you in." Aha! This was just the time to tell them! "That's all right," I said out loud. "We're not scared of the militia. We've got something here to protect us. Give us a light."

Budka trained the flashlight on me, and I pulled the pistol out partways.

"Wha–?"

"My uncle, uh... (I nearly slipped up and said he was a militiaman, but caught myself in time. That would've been stupid, because I'd just said we weren't scared of the militia.) My uncle's an Army officer. We borrowed his gun for tonight. In case we bump into the militia."

"Uh... that's ... That's... uh... real good," Budka mumbled. He'd never expected this.

Java was staring hard at me. He was standing real close. I could see his eyes in the light. What he wanted to say was: "How about our vow never to lie and the three socks for lying?" I nodded, as if to say: "Don't worry. It's all right. If you lie to an enemy, it's not a lie. It's strategy."

The crook and the short kid were up ahead. They didn't know about the pistol, because they hadn't heard our conversation. When we started out again Budka walked fast to catch up with the crook.

"What's up?" the crook asked.

"They've got a gat," Budka said softly, thinking we wouldn't hear him, but I've got very good ears.

"Is it real?" The crook sounded worried.

"Yeh. His old man's an officer."

"Oh. Well, I bet it's not loaded."

They couldn't say anything more, because we caught up with them just then. We made believe we hadn't heard a thing. We had them worried, and that was just fine. They might as well know they couldn't pull anything on us. If they were planning anything funny we'd... We turned off the paved road and headed down the slope, making our way through the thicket. After a while we stopped. By the dim light of the two flashlights we saw a mossy, bricked entrance to an underground passage. A little stream came gurgling out of the tunnel.

"Here it is... The cave," Budka said.

A blast of cold, damp air hit me in the face. It smelled like a grave. *Brrr*!

"We can wait out here while he gets the watch," I said, looking at the crook.

"Sure, if you're scared," Budka sneered.

What a rat he was!

"All right, come on," I muttered. I *had* to get that watch. No matter what.

"Let's go," Budka said.

The crook led the way, Budka followed, then me, then Java. The short kid was supposed to bring up the rear, but, as we later found out, he didn't go into the cave. He raced off home the minute we disappeared in the passage.

The tunnel was so narrow and low that we had to walk in single file and all stooped over. We splashed through the mud in our bare feet, and it was so cold our feet froze. I suddenly felt I was really *underground*. Everything here was damp, dark and spooky. The earth seemed to be pressing down on top of me, choking me. It was like a grave. The crook and Budka were walking up ahead, lighting their way with their flashlights. They blended into a single two-headed, four-armed, four-legged shadow. We turned once and then again, first right, then left. I was

beginning to think that at any minute now (just like what you read about in adventure stories) we'd come into a high, brightly-lit chamber deep inside the cave and see the watch in a huge chest full of stolen treasure.

And then all of a sudden...

All of a sudden I felt as if somebody'd thrown a blanket over my head. The double shadow disappeared. There was nothing but blackness all around me. I stopped in my tracks. A moment later Java bumped into me.

"What's the matter?" he whispered.

"Hey! Where are you?" I shouted in a choked voice. I strained to hear them say something.

There wasn't a sound. Nothing but the cold black silence of the cave. Then, in the distance, we heard something splashing. It was like water pouring out of a pipe.

"You rats!" I shouted. "Don't move, or I'll fire!" I jerked the gun out of my pocket and pulled the trigger as hard as I could.

Bang! There was a flash of light and the thunder of the shot.

"Let's blow!" somebody shouted close by.

Something squished across the mucky mud. It sounded like a crateful of toads hopping off in all directions. Then something splashed far up ahead and someone cried out.

Java made a funny sound. He'd been pulling our box of matches from his pocket and then, all of a sudden – oh, no! – something fell into the mud.

"I dropped them," he said.

I heard him feeling around in the mud, but it was no use. Even if he found the box, the matches'd be wet by now. That's when I felt we were doomed. We had no light, we were all alone in the underground maze, and we were in complete darkness. We could try to feel our way out along the wall, but we'd have no way of knowing if we were getting out or going father into the maze. Besides, there were usually poisonous snakes,

bats, man-eating rats and other horrors in caves like this, so that...

"Fire again. I'll find them by the flash," Java said from where he was crouching beside me.

I jerked the trigger again. *Bang*! In the instant flash I saw my unhappy friend. "He sure must feel guilty for dropping our matches," I said to myself (you always feel sorry for a friend who's in trouble).

Suddenly, he heard Valya's shaky voice calling out, "D-don't shoot, boys! Don't shoot!"

"How'd Valya ever get here?"

"Hey! Where are you?" I shouted.

"H-here," she said, and a flashlight went on right behind Java.

"Golly, you've got a flashlight! Good for you! We just lost our matches," Java said and straightened up. He looked at me proudly (like he'd done so many times before), as if to say that *his* Valya had come to our rescue again. And just in the nick of time, too. It was like a real thriller.

"How'd you find us?" I asked.

"I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here. It's awful down here."

She was right. We'd have time to talk later. We squished back through the mud. Ahh! How wonderful it was to get out of the icy cold, out into the warm summer night again, with the sky full of stars. And how beautiful those scary black trees looked! How much better it was up here on earth than underground.

"What kind of a cave is it?" I asked, looking back at the big black opening in the ground.

"It's a drainage system. To drain off underground water," Valya said.

Everyday words like "drainage system" made the spooky tunnel lose all of its mystery. It became something like a sewer (even though I'd never go down into a sewer at night, either).

"What'd they do, take you in and leave you there?" she asked.

"We don't know. They all hid. They didn't answer us. And when I fired they shouted: 'Let's blow!' Then they ran away. One of them slipped and fell. You should've heard him! If we had had a flashlight..."

"Oh," Valya gasped and brought her hands up to her face (she even knocked the flashlight against her head). "There are wells there! Maybe he drowned!"

"Where? What wells?"

"The drainage wells! Didn't you hear the water splashing? There's a long tunnel and then there's a well, and then there's another tunnel. One end of this tunnel leads outside to the slope, where you entered and the other end leads to a well. It's deep. Maybe two metres deep. Or even deeper. Oh!"

Java and I looked at each other.

"Do we go?" he said.

I nodded. It was like going back into the water if you'd been drowning and had just been pulled out.

"Give me your flashlight," I said to Valya.

I gripped the flashlight and the gun, took a deep breath and ran into the tunnel. Somehow, I seemed to be always leading the way in this adventure of ours. Since I was responsible for the watch business to begin with, it was up to me to lead the way till it was over.

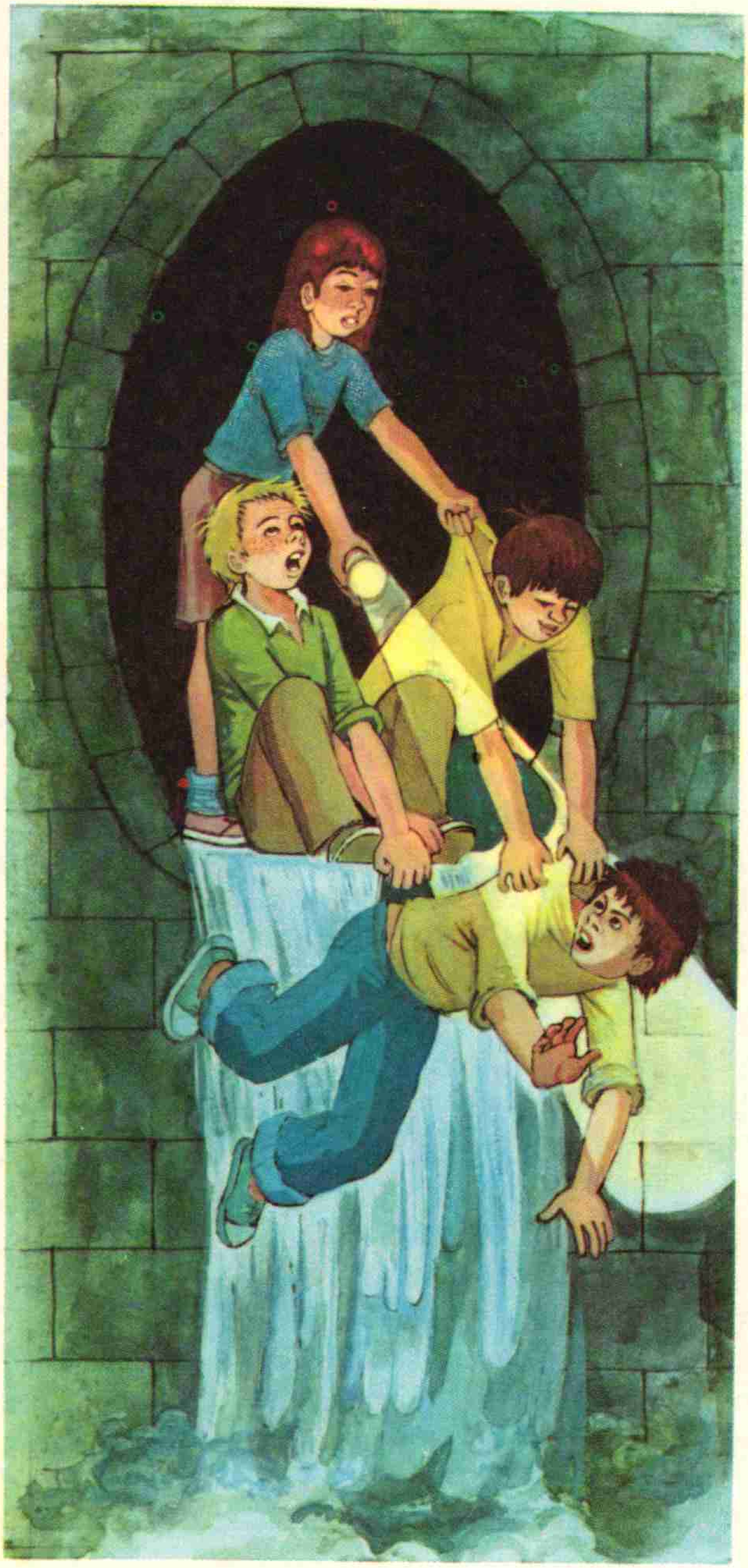
I blazed the trail back like a scout going off on a dangerous mission, but I wasn't a bit scared. Java was right in back of me, breathing hard, and Valya was right in back of him. Besides, this whole place was just a plain, ordinary drainage system. Big deal! But why did I have that sinking feeling in my stomach? What was there to be scared of? We were going to rescue Budka, who might've fallen into the well and gotten hurt. Help! A huge toad jumped out from under my foot. Darn it!

This was the spot. This was as far as we'd gotten. There was our soggy box of matches. The tunnel branched here. Now

I knew what had happened. They'd turned off their flashlights and hidden around the corner. Then, when I'd fired, they'd run off. One of them ran down this branch of the tunnel. What if they both had? Then neither of them had fallen into the well and got himself killed or hurt. That meant we were on a fool's errand. So what? That was fine. I didn't want anybody to get himself killed, did I? Of course not. But still, we'd have to go all the way to the well to make sure. And what if... The sound of water splashing was getting louder and louder. That was no pipe. It was a waterfall! The beam of light lit up the well. Its brick wall began someplace up on top and went someplace far down. I walked over to it slowly and decided to look up first. I could see a round circle of sky and stars about three metres overhead. The circle was criss-crossed by the bars of a grate.

Then I turned the flashlight down. At first I saw the water-washed brick bottom of the well. There was no one there. Just as I decided that we'd come for nothing–What I saw was so unexpected that I nearly toppled into the well. There, right by my feet, was Budka's head. His fingers were clutching at the cracks between the bricks on the inside of the wall. He was hanging on for dear life just below my feet. The waterfall was pouring over his left shoulder, drenching him. I didn't know what he was trying to do, but I could see he couldn't hang on much longer. I flopped down and stretched out in the muddy water, shoving the flashlight and gun into Java's hands before I dropped. Then I grabbed hold of Budka's shoulders and croaked, "Give her the stuff and help me, Java!"

A second later Java was stretched out in the mud beside me. Now we each had a grip on Budka's shoulders. He wouldn't fall, but we couldn't pull him up from a lying position. He was much too heavy, and we weren't that strong. So there we were, lying in the mud, hanging on to him, with the water pouring in through our pants, sloshing over our bodies and running out



through our collars into the well. Only somebody who's had it happen to him will know what I'm talking about. Especially if I say that the water was ice-cold.

"What's the matter, boys? Tell me!" Valya shouted, hopping around in back of us. She couldn't get close enough to see Budka, because we were in her way. I think she might've even walked over us (you know how curious girls are!) if she hadn't managed to step between us, with one of her feet right next to my nose. Then she looked down. "Oh, Budka! Hang on! Try to pull yourself up! Come on! Just a teeny bit more. Come on, dear! Just a little bit more," she pleaded.

I was about to tell her to shut up (she was clucking like a hen, and a lot of help that was!) when I suddenly felt Budka be-

ginning to move upwards. Valya's clucking had had more effect on him than all our tugging. And we really were trying. I was pulling so hard I thought I'd bust a gut. I never dreamed we were such weaklings. We thought we were the strongest kids in Vasukovka. Back home we each do weight-lifting with a piece of rail that's hung on a rope and is used as a dinner gong. Java can lift it nine times, I can lift it seven, Karafolka, that brave descendant of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, can hardly lift it three times and Kolya Kagarlitsky can't even lift it once. When we flexed our muscles we thought they were harder than steel. But now... A sentence kept going through my head again, and again, and again like a broken record. It was a line from a children's poem: "It's like dragging a hippo out of a swamp." That's what happens sometimes: a snatch of a song, or a saying, or something'll get stuck in your head, and you can't get rid of it.

Budka was clutching the edge of the well. We were on our knees now and pulling him with all our might. Valya was gripping his collar with her free hand and pulling, too. First he got his elbows over the edge, then his knees... Whew! I stood up. My own knees were trembling.

"Let's get out of here," Valya said. "You're soaked! You'll catch cold."

"Wait! Shine the light over here," Java said and bent down. "I dropped the gun someplace here. There it is!" It was all covered with mud.

Budka stared at it. "Is it a starter's pistol?" he said. "I guessed it r-right away." His teeth were chattering and his nose was running.

"Then why'd you race off so fast you fell down the well?" I said to myself. I couldn't say it out loud. I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Hurry. You'll catch cold. We can talk outside," Valya said, pulling us along.

We had no intention of hanging around in the tunnel. Our

wet clothes stuck to our bodies, and our teeth were chattering. A few minutes later, we were out in the warm, starry night again.

"Wring out your clothes, boys! This minute! I'll walk away. I won't look. Hear me? Are you crazy? See? I'm looking the other way. Come on!"

Was she ever stubborn! We stood there, wringing out our pants and shirts with whatever strength we had left. The water ran out of our clothes in streams. We grunted and huffed. It was hard work. Valya stood off to a side with her back to us, issuing orders:

"Come on! Wring harder. Don't be lazy."

"Aren't you smart?" I muttered.

"You try wringing them out when they won't wring," Java grumbled.

"It's easy to talk," Budka added.

The fact that all three of us were stark naked, that our teeth were chattering and that we were all grumbling at Valya brought Budka and us closer together. I didn't feel as mad at him as I had before. I didn't hate him like I had before, even though he'd scared us silly when we first went down into the tunnel. (And I still didn't have the watch!) How strange it is: if you help a person, you begin to like him, and if you hurt a person somehow, you begin to hate him.

"Where's the w-w-watch?" I chattered as I wrung out my pants.

"You'll g-get it... D-don't w-worry," Budka chattered as he wrung out his shirt. "Boy, that crook's a clunk if I ever saw one! He scrammed. Anyway, he's no crook. I made that part up. He's Volodia Ivanov. She knows him."

"He isn't? But where's the watch?"

"Don't worry. He has it. It fell out of your pocket when he was dragging you off me. We wanted to give it back, but then I thought up the part about him being a crook to make it sound more interesting. And to scare you."

"Ha!" I said. (That was supposed to mean: I'd like to see you try to scare me!)

"We wanted to take you down into the tunnel and hide. And then, when you were really scared, we'd come out and lead you back. The whole gang was supposed to come. But only two other guys showed up: Volodia and his kid brother. That's why..."

"You think it is easy to sneak out of the house at night?" Valya said. "I spent a whole hour in the john, waiting till everybody forgot about me and fell asleep. Then I sneaked down the back stairs. You're lucky. Your mother's on the night shift. And Volodia and his brother sleep on the porch in the summertime. I know."

"How'd you get here?" I asked, jamming my feet into my pants. (Java and Budka already had theirs on). Now that she'd started talking she'd be sure to turn around. Ever hear of a girl talking for more than a minute if she has her back to you?

"Yuri told me. Oh! I'm not looking. I'm not looking. Yuri told me. I went to the studio and told Maxim Valerianovich all about what happened. All about the watch and everything. Anyway, when I got back I saw Yuri Skripnichenko. He said, 'We're going to murder your pals in the cave tonight.' And I said, 'How?' And he told me what you planned to do. Golly, was I mad! And I said to him, 'You're all bandits! And you're a traitor, besides, 'cause you sold out your own pals.' He was going to pull my braids, but I socked him hard."

"I'll see to him later. Let's go look for Volodia first," Budka said. "I don't think he ran away. He's got to be someplace around here." He led us off through the bushes, the stinging nettles and the sharp thorns, down into the ravine.

"So that's what it was all about! They wanted to scare us," I said to myself. "They invented that story about a crook, and about the militia looking for him, and about a secret hiding place in the cave. And we believed them! What dopes we were! We're as trusting as babies. A blind man could've seen it was

all a pack of lies: the dark tunnel, meeting at midnight and the black mask. They don't even put such junk in books any more. Oh, well, I don't care. Just as long as they return the watch. This whole mess is all on account of it. If not for it, or if it'd been my watch, I'd've never... Wait till I get it back! But what can we do to him? Beat him up?" Somehow, that wasn't what I wanted at all.

"Good for you!" Budka said. "You didn't chicken out. Come to think of it, the watch isn't even yours. You could've said to hell with it. You're a couple of bricks, that's what."

How could we beat him up after that? His words were like balm to us. When an enemy praises you it's the highest kind of praise there is. But how did he know it wasn't our watch? I just opened my mouth to ask him when we heard someone whistle softly in a bush nearby. Then Budka whistled. The branches rustled, and Volodia the ex-crook climbed out. He still had on his black mask.

"Hand over the watch, stupid," Budka said.

"Who d'you think you are?" Volodia said and pulled off his mask. He was the lanky guy who'd kicked me in the ankle.

"Come on, fork it over!"

"Here. Think I need it?" Volodia pulled the watch from his pocket.

"Oh, joy! At last! Right up to the very last moment I'd been thinking that something awful would happen at the very end, and that I'd never see the watch again.

Budka took the watch from Volodia and handed it me (I guess he wanted to hand it to me personally). "Here," he said.

"Thanks," I said before I knew what I was saying. "You're welcome," Budka mumbled. He sounded embarrassed.

"I didn't put the watch in my pocket. I had no faith in watches lying around in pockets any more. I curled my fingers around it and decided not to let go of it till I was back home. Then I'd put it under my pillow. Nothing in the world would make me let go of it now.

We went back up the same way we'd come down. Once again we climbed the narrow, wooden staircase at the foot of the wall. It was pitch dark. The only light there was came from the beams of the two flashlights (this time one of them was Valya's. Budka'd dropped his in the well).

"How d'you know it's not our watch?" I finally said.

"We know all about everything," Budka said. He was trying to sound mysterious.

"I mean it."

"Her kid brother," he nodded in Valya's direction, "told his kid brother," he nodded in Volodia's direction. "It's as simple as that. Those two little kids are friends."

"Oh."

"Listen, Budka," Valya said, "why'd you go as far as the well? You could've taken the lower tunnel out to the slope."

"Ah!"

"Why didn't you?"

"What if they had taken the wrong turn and gotten lost? Then we'd have been responsible for them, wouldn't we? And they didn't even have a flashlight or anything."

"Weren't you scared of the gun?"

"Nah."

What d'you know? So Budka was a great big hero. He'd stayed on in case he'd have had to rescue us. You never could tell about people. He sure looked like an ugly customer and then...

"How'll you get home? There aren't any trolley cars running this late at night," Valya said.

"We'll manage," Budka said. "We'll take the short cut across the boulevard. I'll show them the way. *Ciao*!"

"*Ciao*," said Volodia.

"Be seeing you," said Valya.

"So long," said Java.

"Good night," I said.

We each went our own way: Valya to her house (up the back stairs), Volodia to his (he lived nearby), and we followed Budka through a large brick archway, then through another, then down a narrow cobblestoned street. Nobody said a word. Budka'd been talkative enough when Valya and then Volodia were with us, but as soon as we were alone he stopped talking. I guess he felt embarrassed. We would've liked to get rid of him as soon as we could, too. When we reached the boulevard he said,

"Keep going straight till you see the bridge. *Ciao.*" He waved goodbye.

I hate people using words I don't understand. Here was that "*ciao*" again, and I didn't know what it meant. What could I say to him that he wouldn't understand? I had no time to think of anything real good so I said, "Harrow!"

"Winnower!" Java said, catching on right away.

I was sure that Budka, a city boy, would think these were some kind of real smart slang words he didn't know. Sure enough, he nodded seriously, waved and headed back into the dark.

We started off down the boulevard, but if you think that was the end of our night's adventures, you've got another think coming.

We finally reached my uncle's house. There was the balcony. The rope was hanging just where we'd left it. Now the whole house was asleep, including the two windows on the fifth floor where there'd been a party. Java wanted to climb up first, as always, but I elbowed him aside. I didn't want him to forget that I was leading the way in this. Boy, was I stupid! If I'd only known. But I didn't.

I started climbing up the rope. I never thought it'd be so hard to pull myself up. I didn't know how tired I was from pulling Budka out of the well. I had charley horses in every single muscle. I never thought I'd feel this bad. My arms ached. I felt someone was sticking a knife into my shoulders. My feet

kept losing the rope, so I had to kick out to try and find it again, just like a baby kicking in its crib. It was only about three metres from the ground to the balcony, but what torture those three metres were! I was puffing like a steam-engine by the time I got halfway up. There was just a little more to go before I could grab hold of the balcony railing. All of a sudden I heard somebody shriek: "Burglars!" I saw something white leaning out of the black square of the window right over me. (It was my aunt and uncle's bedroom window.)

All the rest happened so fast I was caught off-guard. My aunt appeared on the balcony looking like a ghost in her long white nightgown. She was holding something black. Then she leaned over the rail and shouted: "There!" And she turned whatever that black thing was over. Right on top of me. Something plopped on my head and ran down into my eyes and my ears, down under my collar, under my shirt and my pants, and into my shoes. Whatever it was tasted sweet. She'd grabbed a pot of stewed cherries and dumped it out on me. I was stunned. I don't know how I managed to hang on to the rope. I blew bubbles and spat, and tried to shake stewed cherries off my head.

But my aunt decided that wasn't enough. A few seconds later I saw a knife flash in her hand. She was going to cut the rope and send me crashing to the ground!

"Don't cut the rope, Auntie!" I screamed.

She dropped the knife. The handle hit my head with a thud. My grip loosened, and I slid down, but when I touched the ground my knees buckled under me, so that instead of landing on my feet I plopped right into a puddle of stewed cherries.

"Oh! Is that you, Pavlik?" My aunt gasped.

"No, it's somebody else," I said. I was still sitting in the puddle.

Java giggled.

My aunt was wide awake now. "O Lord! How'd you get there?" she moaned. "What're you doing there in the middle of the night? Is Vanya there, too? Are you out of your minds? What're you doing there?"

"Don't shout! You'll wake the neighbours," I muttered, picking myself up off the ground and brushing squashed cherries off the seat of my pants in disgust.

She finally realized she was out there in her nightgown and not in an evening gown, and probably decided she didn't want the neighbours to see her like that. "Come around to the door. I'll open it for you," she said and disappeared.

As we climbed the stairs I had a feeling that this was what soldiers felt like when they were on their way to surrender. The thing that worried me most was what we'd tell her. How could we explain? We were too pooped to start at the beginning and tell her all about everything that'd happened, but she'd be sure to keep at us, asking all sorts of questions. And we'd have to say something.

"Let's put off our pact till tomorrow morning, Java. No

socks now. All right? I'll agree to anything you say tomorrow morning."

"All right."

We only had a few minutes to think of something. Our brains were buzzing like electronic calculators, doing a million operations a second, but all we came up with was a silly little lie about having had a bet to see who could climb a rope to the balcony the fastest. Why had we done it in the middle of the night? Because we wouldn't have been allowed to in the daytime.

When my aunt (who now had on a housecoat) opened the door we told her our little lie. We tried to look as innocent as possible. My aunt was a brave woman (as you've just seen). She was very good and loved me very much (maybe because she had no children), so she believed us. And the stewed cherries actually came in handy, because she didn't notice how wet and creased our clothes were. We said it was the cherries. I told Java to splash some syrup from the puddle on himself to make it look like he'd gotten doused, too. But he'd gotten off easy. She'd dumped the whole pot on me.

My aunt felt awful. She kept apologizing. After a while she said, "It was such a nice pot of stewed cherries. There was enough to last three days. But I thought you were burglars. What a shame."

You couldn't tell whether she was more sorry for us or for the cherries.

"Don't tell Uncle Grisha yet," I said, hearing my uncle snoring away in the bedroom and hoping he wouldn't wake up. He was a hot-tempered man. He could easily put us on the next train back to Vasukovka.

"All right. I'll make another potful of cherries, but don't you ever do such a thing again! Come on, off with your clothes and into the tub. I'll wash your things and hang them up to dry. Come on, don't waste time."

We undressed quickly, but before I did I slipped the watch

off my wrist when my aunt wasn't looking and stuck it under my pillow. I'd had to put it on before I started climbing the rope.

When Java and I got into the tub the bathroom began to smell as if there were two pots that had stewed cherries in them soaking there instead of two human beings.

Now at last we were in bed and drifting off to sleep. Now at last the night's adventures were over. Now at la...

Chapter 14

"LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!" THE WATCH FINDS ITS OWNER. THE APPEARANCE OF JAVA STANISLAVSKY AND PAVLIK NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO

I had a terrible dream. I dreamed I was in a damp, underground place, crawling along all by myself. Somehow, though, I could see in the dark. Bats were hanging upside-down on the vaulted ceiling, water was running down the walls, and there were muddy streams underfoot. Horrible pop-eyed toads were lined up along the walls. I kept saying to myself: "Golly, I can see in the dark! I never knew I could. I don't even need a flashlight. I can see just as good as in broad daylight." And I crawled on. I wasn't a bit scared, because I could see in the dark. Suddenly, I saw a niche in the wall. Old Granny Trindichka was sitting on a real royal throne there. When she opened her mouth and started talking she sounded just like our teacher, Galina Sidorovna. This is what she said:

"Why haven't you returned my royal watch yet, you scoundrel?"

Well!

"Don't worry, I will," I said. "Why'd you call me that? You always said we shouldn't use bad words in school, and now you are. That's not nice."

"Are you talking back to me, you brat? I'll sock you one!" Granny Trindichka said. But now she sounded just like Java. She grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and tossed me down a well. There I was, flying down, down, down. All of a sudden I felt someone gripping my shoulders. It was me. I was hanging over the edge of a well, holding myself up by my own shoulders, I was the one in the well, and I was the one hanging on to the one in the well! I wasn't a bit scared to see there were

two of me. It's the law of pairs," I said to myself. That's when I heard my uncle saying,

"Whose bodies are lying here? Hm?"

I opened my eyes. I felt I was still dreaming. My uncle was standing by the couch. He had his pistol in one hand and in the other– our note. The one we'd left in the drawer when we'd borrowed the gun. (Oh-oh! We'd forgotten all about the note!)

"Time to get up, you corpses! It's after ten. Where'd you say your bodies were last night? Come clean," Uncle Grisha said sternly. He read a line from our note: *Look for our bodies in the monastery vaults.* "That was a mighty fine job you had lined up for me, didn't you? By the way, did a pot of stewed cherries get poured out on your bodies? Hm? I don't really believe this woman's story," he said and nodded at his wife.

My aunt was standing beside him, looking at us unhappily, as if to say, "It's not my fault, boys. Why did you lie to me?"

Java and I looked at each other and sighed. Then I sat up in bed and said to him, "Go on. Six at least."

Java sat up and said, "Me, too. We've earned them. Six each."

And so we socked each other six times. While we were doing this Uncle Grisha kept looking from Java to me and then back to Java again. Finally he said,

"I don't know what this is all about and I don't care, but you're on the right track, boys. I'm all for it. In fact, I can contribute a bit myself."

And my uncle clonked our heads together hard. I thought mine had surely split in half like a watermelon and that sparks were flying out of each half.

"Now tell me all about it," he said.

"Wait. You knocked my brains out. I can't even see straight," I moaned, clutching my head like I was pressing the two broken halves together.

I felt a bump rising on my forehead. I looked at Java. He

had one swelling in the middle of his forehead as well, deep purple in colour.

"What did you do?" my aunt cried. "You might've killed them!"

"Don't worry," Uncle Grisha said. He didn't sound a bit worried. "Their heads are nearly solid bone. Nothing'll happen to them."

"That's what you think! How'll we remember our parts in the movie now?" I groaned.

"What movie? Come on, come clean."

"Put something cold on your foreheads, so there won't be any bumps," my aunt said and brought us two cold cloths.

We held them to our foreheads and then began our story from the beginning, with no lies. Our confession was, as they say in the papers, interrupted by applause. And exclamations, because my aunt kept throwing up her hands and exclaiming: "My Lord!", "What d'you know?" and "My goodness!"

We told them the most important part first: about the watch, and showed it to them ("My Lord!"). We told them about Valya and Budka, and about our skirmish, and about our adventures that night ("My goodness!"). We told them about Maxim Valerianovich and the studio ("What d'you know?"). We ended by saying that the assistant director would be calling for us in a studio car in a few minutes. And what would we say?

"I didn't know you were actors, boys," Uncle Grisha said. "The newsstands aren't selling your autographed pictures yet. That's a shame. I wouldn't have knocked your heads together if I'd known. But you should have told us the truth to begin with. What'll we say now?"

It was all just like the movies. Uncle Grisha'd just got through talking when the doorbell rang. While my aunt went to open the door Java and I began dressing fast. As fast as people scamper around in the old silent movies. We had our pants on and were just pulling on our shirts when the assistant director

came into the room, so he didn't see our faces right away.

"Hallo, everybody. I've come for your young men," he said cheerfully. "They've probably told you all about it."

"Yes, of course," Uncle Grisha said. He sounded guilty. "I'm sorry to say that they don't... um... look very photogenic this morning."

That's when our heads came through our shirts and the assistant director saw the bumps on our foreheads.

"Hm," he said. "Hi, boys. What a shame. But you know..." He took a few steps back, squinted at us like he was sizing us up and said, "it's not too bad. It's true to life. Yes, indeed. Come along."

"They haven't had their breakfast yet," my aunt said and hurried off to the kitchen.

"No? Why, it's nearly lunchtime," he said.

"We're not hungry!" The way we shrieked, you'd think somebody was killing us. What if he changed his mind and called it all off while we were having breakfast?

"Don't make us anything," I said, following my aunt into the kitchen. When I was close beside her I whispered, "I'll never forgive you if he goes away while we're having breakfast. Never."

"Well, then, at least take along a sandwich apiece."

"All right. But hurry. He might leave any minute."

She began zipping back and forth across the small kitchen, clucking like a hen all the while. At last she handed me two wrapped-up sandwiches, each weighing a ton, but I didn't argue, so's not to waste any more time.

"We'll call for Maxim Valerianovich on the way," the assistant director said when we got into the car.

As we drove towards the monastery I was thinking about Valya. It wasn't fair. Why couldn't she come along, too? After all, she'd done so much for us. Why couldn't she be in the movie, too? She could stand around in the crowd. She didn't

have to be up in the front row with us. If there were boys like us in the movie, there could be a girl in it, too. Especially a girl like her who could stand up to a whole gang of boys, who wasn't afraid to go down into a dark tunnel all by herself at night. A girl who wasn't afraid of anything.

"Can a girl come with us?" I asked the assistant director.

"A girl? Is she nice?" he asked and smiled.

"You bet!" Java said. "She's no sissy. She's a brick. You must've seen her. She was with us yesterday."

"He said boys, but..."

"You can put makeup on her so she'll look like a boy. Then nobody'll guess. Huh?" Java said. "She lives right here."

"Well... All right. You go get her while I call for Maxim Valerianovich. Wait for me here, near the taxi rank."

We got out of the car. The assistant director drove off. Java stopped outside Valya's house. He stood there for a minute, then touched the bump on his forehead and said, "Maybe just one of us should call for her. What's the use of both of us going up?"

This was something new. He was ashamed of the way he looked! But Valya'd be sure to notice anyway, sooner or later. So I said,

"All right. You go on up by yourself. I don't mind. She's your friend more than she's mine anyway."

"Oh. Well, let's go up together then. I just thought..."

I don't know what he thought. Anyway, we were going to go up together. Each of us clapped a hand over the bump on his forehead, but we didn't have far to go, because there was Valya, on her way out.

"Oh, hello! How'd it go? Did you get in trouble? Why're you holding on to your heads?"

"Hello," we both said.

"We've come to call for you. We're all going to the studio together. The assistant director said..."

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"We are? Hooray! Oh, look! You've got bumps on your foreheads!"

She had noticed them after all. It was no use trying to hide them any more. We dropped our hands.

"I know how you got them! You were probably socking each other again, weren't you?"

We nodded. That's when we saw Budka. He was crossing the yard, looking very glum. He hadn't noticed us.

"He really got into trouble," Valya said in a whisper. "His mother came home early yesterday, and she had to wait up for him. You know what he looked like when he got home. You should've heard her screaming. I'm sorry for him. He isn't really that bad. At any rate, he's not a sissy like Yuri Skripnichenko."

Java and I looked at each other. I think we both had the same idea. We'd take Budka along, too. Didn't the director say to bring along a couple of boys? Well, we'd bring Budka. Why not? He'd be in a movie. He'd become famous. So what if he was our former enemy? We bore him no grudge. Let him be famous. We didn't mind. We wanted to be kind to everybody today. When we went up to him Budka didn't understand what we were talking about at first.

"Huh? What?" he said and blinked.

"To the studio. You're going to be in a movie. Understand? Don't you want to? Are you nuts, turning down something like this?"

Anyway, when the assistant director stopped by for us opposite the taxi rank there were four of us waiting for him.

Maxim Valerianovich looked out of the car window and said jokingly, as always, "Hello, dear colleagues! I'm not asking any questions. I see that all is well. There were grave battles, but our team won. Am I right?"

I nodded and turned back my left cuff. The watch was on my wrist.

"That's fine. That's just fine." He looked sort of mysterious.

"Did you find the tsar yet?" I asked.

"You never can tell," he said and smiled mysteriously again. He knew something, but for some reason or other he wasn't telling us. Still and all, I felt it must be good news.

"Please tell us," I coaxed.

"Patience is the password, my friends. The matter will be settled when we reach the studio. The cinema is the greatest marvel of the 20th century."

All this mysterious talk only made us more curious and more impatient. I couldn't sit still. I kept twisting around, fidgeting and looking out of the window, wondering when we'd finally reach the studio. There was the low gate. There was the billboard with the words: "Everything about a person must be beautiful: his face, his clothing, his soul and his mind."

"I'll never be a beautiful person," I said to myself, touching the bump on my forehead. We pulled up outside the revolving door and piled out of the car.

"We'll have to part for a while now, dear lady and gentlemen," Maxim Valerianovich said. "I'm going straight to the set. You're going to the lake. We're appearing in different films. Remember this day, little sparrows. Perhaps, for one of you, it will become an historical landmark in your life. Who knows but that one of you may some day become a true thespian? If so, you'll look back upon today as the first step along this glorious road. Well, good luck. I've a very short scene, so I'll come over to have a look at you later."

Maxim Valerianovich went into the main building. We followed the paved walk around it. This was a very solemn occasion. We felt as if he'd just knighted us. A short way along the walk we saw a white stone bust of a brave-looking man. He looked like a proud white bird. The assistant director said it was Alexander Dovzhenko, a writer and director of the Kiev Film Studios for many years and that the studios were now named after him.

The paved walk turned left to a large gray building, but we

continued straight on past some long sheds. There were wagons, carts and sleighs outside the sheds, just like you'd see on any collective farm. There was a difference, though: some of these were the old-fashioned kind that you'd only see in a book and others were brand new and there were a lot of broken ones, too. Then we were passing parts of sets: a piece of a wall with a window and two white columns that looked like a part of a manor house; a broken ship's bridge; a little cannon set on spoked wheels, the great-great-granny of a rocket launcher. There were piles of painted cardboard and plywood.

All of a sudden we saw a flash of water behind some bushes. It was the lake. We came closer. It was a little pond of a lake full of real wet water, real water lilies, real sedge and real weeping willows on the bank. It had a rickety little bridge across it. Still, this was no ordinary lake. It was a movie lake. There was a wooden raft strapped to empty oildrums in the middle of the lake. A tripod and a camera were set up on the raft. And there were two men in smocks on it, too. A big spotlight on an iron pole rose over the camera. On the far bank some other men in smocks were holding big squares of foil-covered plywood. Huge sun-spots were bouncing off the squares onto the little bridge. An old-fashioned gendarme in uniform was smoking and talking to a man in a working man's blouse on the bridge beside him.

There was a kind of delivery truck on our side of the lake. The motor was running and making a sound like a growling dog. But it wasn't the motor growling, it was something inside the truck. We were later told this was a sound track truck. The grass all around was full of black rubber hoses that were actually cables and that looked like huge squirming snakes. There were so many of them. Some were attached to the truck, others were sunk in the lake with their far ends on the raft and attached to the camera and spotlight. There were also metal boxes in the grass, benches and a table. And everywhere there were people. People bustling about, shouting and arguing.

I noticed a woman in a white doctor's smock in the crowd and said to myself, "There. Shooting a film really is dangerous. That's why the main lobby has a hospital smell. And she's the doctor." I had no time to think of anything else, because bald old Zhenya (Evgeny Mikhailovich, the film director), who was now in the lake, wearing a pair of wading boots, spotted us just then and shouted,

"Why're you late? You're wrecking our schedule!" He splashed towards us, muddying the water. "Hello, boys!" he squished over, bent down to have a closer look at our faces, then straightened up, glared at the assistant director and said, "Who're these invalids? I've never seen them before."

I held my breath.

"What's this?" he said. Now he was glaring at us. "Are you all batty? Is this a plot? One got sick, these two... What're these bumps? Did I tell you to come here with bumps on your foreheads? No! You were perfect characters. I was delighted. Now you've gone and ruined everything!" And then, so suddenly that it was hard to believe he'd just been shouting at us, he winked and said in a very friendly tone of voice, "Never mind, boys. We'll get rid of the bumps. That's what Lydia Vasilyevna is here for. Lydia Vasilyevna!" he called, turning to the woman in the white smock. She came hurrying over. "Put something on these, please. And fix their faces."

Lydia Vasilyevna opened her little satchel. It was full of brushes, tubes, jars, paint and some gooey stuff that looked like clay. She wasn't a doctor, she was the makeup woman!

"Ha," I said to myself. "And I thought she was here in case there'd be an accident.

Lydia Vasilyevna started in on Java, because he was closer to her. One, two, three! She smeared something on him, rubbed something on top of that, powdered something on top of that, and the bump vanished. It was gone. Then it was my turn. It was a funny feeling, and ticklish too, to have someone smearing, rubbing and then powdering your face. (I always thought

women were the only ones to powder their faces.) No one had ever put makeup on us before. When Lydia Vasilyevna used an eyebrow pencil on me and then some lipstick I burst out laughing. I imagined us walking down the street back home with our faces full of makeup. Why, we'd have the whole village crowding around to get a look at us.

Budka and Valya were standing off to a side. They looked like two unhappy dogs in the rain. They'd probably decided that they weren't going to be in the movie after all, that everybody'd forgotten all about them, and that they might as well have stayed at home. It was an awful kind of feeling to have.

Evgeny Mikhailovich was watching Lydia Vasilyevna work on our faces. He'd take a few steps back to get a better view of us. After a while he said, "That's fine. Now these two," and he turned to Valya and Budka. They both beamed.

While Lydia Vasilyevna was doing Budka's face he stood very still and looked very serious. Valya kept peeping at herself in the mirror that was set into the lid of the satchel. I was surprised to see that Lydia Vasilyevna wasn't trying to make Valya look like a beautiful movie star. On the contrary, she was following the director's instructions. She undid Valya's ponytail and messed up her hair, making her look like a waif. Then Lydia Vasilyevna smeared some soot on us.

"I guess we're going to be tramps," I said to myself.

"Where's Klava? Where are the children's costumes? What's the matter now?" Evgeny Mikhailovich shouted.

"She's gone to Wardrobe to get a dress for the girl," someone said.

"Couldn't she have done that before?"

"We didn't know there'd be a girl."

"Well, you should've known. If there are boys, there ought to be girls."

Valya looked embarrased to have all those grownup people arguing on account of her.

"Here I am! I'm coming!" a tall, slim girl who was running

towards us shouted. She was Klava. She had a lot of makeup on, too (that's what a real movie star was like!). She was carrying a bundle of rags.

"Come on, kids!" she said cheerfully.

Our movie clothes were lying on a bench in back of the truck. Actually, they weren't clothes. They were rags and tatters. I'd never worn anything like that in my life, but this was for Art's sake... Valya and Klava went behind the truck. We began changing our clo.... personalities. By the time we were done we had the giggles.

"Look at the scarecrow!"

"Look at yourself! You look like a jailbird!"

"Oh, I'm dying! Look at you in those rags! And you've got lipstick on!" we shrieked.

That's when Valya appeared from behind the truck. She had on a torn, filthy dress that was barely hanging together. As if on command we stood at attention and then bowed low.

"Hello, Your Majesty."

Valya picked up the edges of her skirt daintily and curtseyed. We burst out laughing again.

"That's enough! Come back out. We're starting!" Evgeny Mikhailovich called.

He led us down the bank to where a wooden table and two benches were sunk in the ground in the shade of a big tree like they are in the country. He sat us down on the benches and began explaining the story.

"It's like this: the picture is about the revolutionary events that took place in the Ukraine in 1905. This is your scene: Artem is a worker and a revolutionary. A gendarme overtakes him on the bridge and wants to arrest him. Artem punches the gendarme, knocking him into the lake, and runs away. You kids will be in a boat near the bridge, fishing. You witness the scene and are very happy and excited. That's all. However, your joy must be genuine. In order to achieve this, try to imagine

that you dislike all gendarmes (after all, you're working-class children), and that this particular gendarme is your worst enemy, because he's forever picking on you, and so on. Let's run it through. Now, I'm the gendarme. I'm chasing Artem. I grab him. Artem wrenches free. He hits me. I fall into the lake. *Splash*! Come on."

We began hooting, yelling, laughing and jumping up and down.

"Stop!" Evgeny Mikhailovich held up his hand. "No, no. You're overdoing it. That's pandemonium. No. No kids express their joy like this. You sound like a bunch of crazy people, and if you jump up and down like that the boat will capsize. It has to look natural. It has to be convincing."

That was a nice how d'you do! First he said we should go to

it, and then he said we were overdoing it! He should drop in some day and see all hell break loose when Styopa Karafolka comes bursting into the classroom, shouting that the math teacher's sick and there won't be any math. What he'd see would be real joy. We'd really be throwing ourselves into it. But this...

"Let's try it again. Try to be serious. Try to make it real. The gendarme falls into the lake. *Splash*! Come on!"

"Oh! Ah! Hey!" we cried faintly, forcing our smiles.

"Wait!" he said and raised his hand again. "You misunderstood me. That's the other extreme. Save this kind of joy for a funeral. Can't you rejoice normally? Convincingly? Genuinely? He's your enemy! Your worst enemy! And he's been knocked into the lake. What joy to see him thrashing around there! He's always tormented you. I know! He gave you those bumps on your foreheads yesterday. Yes, yes! It was he! Have you forgotten? You were reading a leaflet on a fence, and he came over to break up the gathering and knocked your heads together. That rat!" The director was speaking like it had all really happened. Listening to him, I nearly believed it was true. "And here he is, that dog, racing towards the bridge, trying to nab Artem. Now Artem's your friend." Evgeny Mikhailovich was all excited. "He grabs Artem. Artem swings. *Pow! Pow!* He sends the gendarme flying, right into the water. *Splash!* Come on!"

We all burst out laughing on cue.

"There! That's fine! Good for you. Thank you. That's how I want you to do it during the take. All right? Lydia Vasilyevna! (The makeup woman came hurrying towards him again.) Freshen up their bumps, please. I want them to be visible. We'll put in a line about them in the previous scene."

While Lydia Vasilyevna was fixing up our faces Valya whispered,

"You can be proud of your bumps. They're going to be part of the history of the Silver Screen."

"Ah, lay off!" I said. I tried to sound indifferent. Actually, though, I was very happy and proud. Just think: they were going to put in a new line, and all on account of our bumps!

"Come on, we're starting!" Evgeny Mikhailovich said. He led us over to a rowboat. "D'you know how to row?"

"Sure," Java said. "We grew up rowing."

"Fine. Now then... The girl sits in the prow. You," he said to Budka, "sit here. You," he put his hand on my shoulder, "man the oars. And you," he turned to Java, "sit in the stern and steer. As you see, there's a rock in the stern. Drop it when you're told to. And see that the boat doesn't drift out of range. One last thing: by no means are you to look into the camera! Only at the gendarme, or you'll spoil the take."

We got into the boat. Java pushed off. I swung the oars back once, and again, trying to row as smoothly as possible so they could all see how good I was, but I had no chance to dip the oars into the water a third time.

"Stop!" the cameraman on the raft shouted. He had his camera trained on us. It was so unexpected that I jerked. One of the oars skimmed over the water, spraying Budka and Java. Boy, I'd sure shown them how good I was at rowing!

"Back!" the cameraman shouted. "And a bit to the left. Now to the right. A little bit forward. No, that's too much. Back again. Now left. A little bit more. That's enough. Now a bit to the right." We must've moved back and forth like that for at least five minutes. Finally the fussy cameraman shouted, "Stop! Drop anchor! And sit very still or you'll move out of range."

Java dropped his rock from the stern. Valya dropped hers from the prow. The boat stopped moving. We sat very still, waiting for the action to begin.

"Attention, please! Everyone ready? We're starting," Evgeny Mikhailovich boomed all of a sudden. There he was, standing on the raft beside the cameraman, though none of us had

noticed how he'd gotten there. He was speaking into a megaphone.

The gendarme and Artem dropped their cigarettes. A young man wearing a beret came running across the bridge towards them. He was carrying a slate that had a striped black-and-white wooden slat across the top. It looked like a small blackboard. Written on it in chalk was:

"ARTEM"
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"Lights! Camera! Action!" Evgeny Mikhailovich shouted.

The young man in the beret raised the striped slat of the clapper board and slapped it down. Then he shouted, "Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take One." He tucked the clapper board under his arm, doubled over and trotted off the bridge.

Meanwhile, on the bridge, the gendarme and Artem had begun to wrestle. Artem pulled free and swung. *Pow*! The gendarme went flying. *Splash*! He raised a fountain of spray. A moment later all you could see of him were his boots disappearing into the lake. Artem was gone, too. Then the water began to churn and the gendarme's head popped up. He'd lost his cap. His wet hair was plastered over his eyes. Water was running down his face. His mustache drooped like a walrus'. He blew out a fountain of water. Golly. It really looked like it was all for real.

"Come on! Be happy!" we heard Evgeny Mikhailovich screaming at us.

We all sat up with a jerk. We were stunned. I didn't have a mirror, so I couldn't see my own face, but Valya, Java and Budka really looked stupid. Their eyes were blank, their mouths hung open. Now they were twitching their faces, but you couldn't say those were happy smiles. Goodness only knows what they were.

"Cut!" Evgeny Mikhailovich shouted. Something clicked. The growling inside of the truck stopped. "What's the matter? What'd you do, go to sleep? Who's supposed to be playing your parts? Me? You're in the same frame with the gendarme. He falls into the water. Then there's a close-up of you kids. You're overjoyed. We ran through it three times. Now you've ruined the first take. And the gendarme has to change into dry clothes. See what you've done?"

We sat there feeling like nincompoops. We'd been so fascinated by what the gendarme was doing that we'd completely forgotten we were a part of the same scene and were supposed to be acting, too. Still and all, this was our very first time on a real, live set. We couldn't be great actors right away.

The gendarme got out of the water and shook his fist at us, but he didn't look mad. In fact, he was smiling. He even winked at us. Then he went behind the truck to change.

"We sure made a mess of that. Let's try to do it right this time," Java whispered.

"Right."

"Let's."

"Sure."

While the gendarme was busy changing I was busy storing up genuine joy. I was trying to remember all the happy days in my life: the time my parents got me new soccer boots; the time I'd swiped the biggest watermelon in the watermelon patch; the time my worst enemy, Stepan Karafolka, got a D in gym. I caught Java's eye. He was looking at me and smiling. I guessed what he was remembering. I could've bet he was remembering the time I dived off the willow tree, caught my trunks on a branch and ripped them way up the side. Well, he could remember whatever he wanted to. After all, it was for Art's sake! Just as long as we didn't mess up the next take.

"Ah, you louse! It serves you right! Ha-ha-ha!" Budka was whispering to himself, getting himself into the right mood.

I couldn't hear or see how Valya was getting ready for the scene, but I was sure she was, too. Boy, we'd show them this time! Boy, we'd be real happy!

The gendarme came out from behind the truck in a new, dry uniform. You'd think he'd never been near the water. A minute later he was back on the bridge with Artem again.

"Lights! Camera! Action!" Evgeny Mikhailovich shouted.

Once again the young man in the beret came running up, slapped the clapper board and shouted, "Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take Two."

Something in the truck began to growl again. Artem and the gendarme began to wrestle. *Pow! Splash!* The gendarme landed in the lake. We all jumped up.

"Cut!" Evgeny Mikhailovich shouted.

Ahh... Here we were, all set to rejoice. This time it was Artem's fault. He'd tripped and fallen when he was making his getaway, and he'd still been in camera range. Artem was the hero. He wasn't supposed to trip and fall. Heroes don't trip. Only the bad guys trip and fall in the movies.

"What with all these watermelon rinds lying around, even an acrobat would slip," Artem was mumbling.

Evgeny Mikhailovich frowned, but he didn't say anything. That's when we found out that movie directors don't shout at the stars. They only shout at the extras.

The gendarme got out of the water and shook his fist at Artem, but this time he wasn't smiling and he didn't wink. He went off behind the truck to change. After a while we heard Evgeny Mikhailovich shouting again,

"Lights! Camera! Action!"

Clack! went the clapper board.

"Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take Three."

Pow! Splash!

"Hooray! Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!" We shrieked and yelled, expressing genuine joy, and not so much because that was the part we were supposed to be playing, as because we were so

happy and relieved: we were finally in a movie! Evgeny Mikhailovich smiled and nodded at us. He was pleased. We'd played our parts well.

"Cut!" the cameraman shouted. "It's no good. There was a branch in the way."

"Remove the branch! This minute! What's going on? Why wasn't everything prepared in advance? You're wrecking our schedule! It's enough to drive one mad!" Evgeny Mikhailovich was shouting, though this time I couldn't tell whom he was shouting at.

We sat there looking at each other proudly. This time it wasn't our fault. We'd played our parts well. Evgeny Mikhailovich had smiled at us and nodded. What a darn shame that this take was ruined, too! It meant all our joy'd been for nothing.

The gendarme got out of the water again but he didn't shake his fist at anyone. He was muttering under his breath and probably cursing. I could understand him. It was much harder to keep getting shoved into the lake than trying to be genuinely happy.

"Lights! Camera! Action!"

Clack! went the clapper board.

"Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take Four."

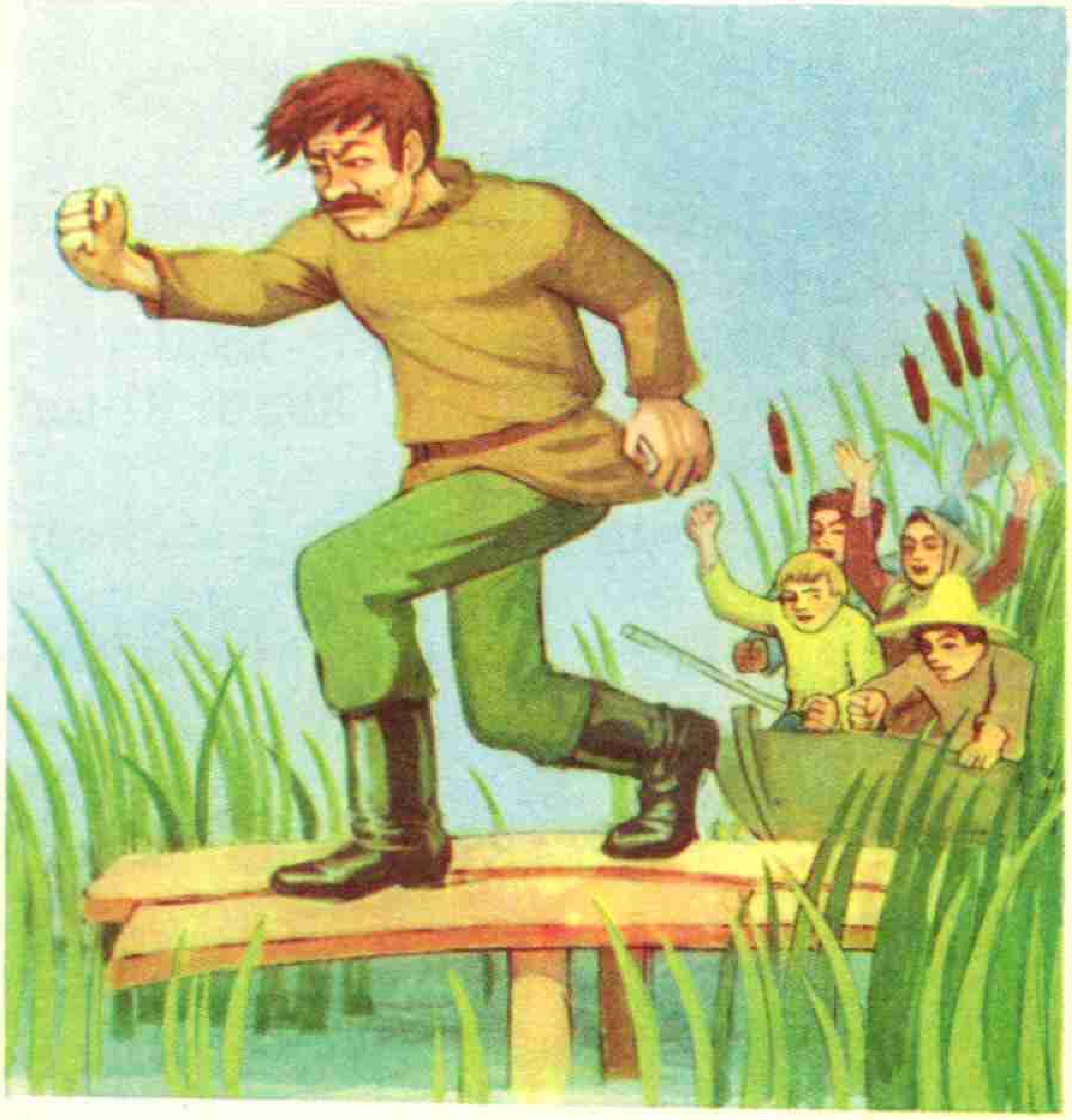
Pow! Splash!

"Ha-ha-ha! Hooray! Ho-ho-ho!"

"Cut! The gendarme's face isn't expressive enough."

I'd like to see how expressive Evgeny Mikhailovich's face'd be after he'd gotten knocked into the lake four times in a row.

"Lights! Camera! Action!"



Clack! went the clapper board.

"Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take Five."

Pow! Splash!

"Cut!"

One half of the gendarme's mustache had gotten unstuck. And no wonder. A real mustache would've been shot to pieces after all that dunking, and this one was fake. The dripping gendarme stomped off behind the truck. After a while a dry gendarme came out from behind it.

"Lights! Camera! Action!"

Clack! went the clapper board.

"Artem. Two hundred and ninety-seven. Take Six."

Pow! Splash!

"Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho! Hooray!"

"Cut! Good for you! At last. That winds it up," Evgeny Mikhailovich said. He sounded very pleased. (We all beamed.) All of a sudden he stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes got very big. "What's that? On your wrist?"

I didn't know he meant me and went on smiling happily. Budka nudged me. I looked at my wrist. Now I knew what he meant.

"The watch..." I mumbled.

"Murderer! Did you ever hear of working-class children wearing gold-plated watches before the revolution? You've ruined all the takes!" Evgeny Mikhailovich was shouting in a wailing sort of a voice. Then he raised the megaphone to his

mouth and shouted in his usual kind of voice, "Places, everybody! We'll do another take!" Then he turned to me and said in the same kind of wailing voice as before, "Take off the watch and hand it to somebody on the shore. This minute!"

I felt numb all over. I looked down at my feet and said, "No, I won't."

"What?" Evgeny Mikhailovich couldn't believe his ears.

"I won't. It's not my watch. It got lost once. I've got to give it back to the man who owns it today."

"You want to kill the scene?"

"Then I don't have to be in it. I'll go ashore."

The wet gendarme was standing waist-deep in the water nearby. He said, "Come on, give me that watch."

"Anything else?" I said and quickly put my hand behind my back, as if he might try to wrench the watch off it.

"Don't you trust me?" the gendarme said and smiled. Since I didn't reply, he said very softly. "I trusted you when we were at the beach, didn't I?"

I felt like somebody'd clubbed me. "Wh-a-a-t?"

"Don't you recognize me?"

I stared hard. Still harder. Then still harder. No. Impossible. He didn't look a bit like him. I turned to Java. He shrugged. He didn't recognize him, either. The gendarme was looking at the people on the shore. I thought he was searching for someone. Then he saw Lydia Vasilyevna and shouted,

"You've made me up so that these boys won't even return my watch!"

Everyone began to laugh. So it really was him! It really was the stranger from Apartment 13! Now I was smiling, too.

"Then why're you ... like this?" I said. "You said you were going to be a tsar, but you're just an old gendarme. We've been racing all over the city, looking for a tsar."

Everybody laughed again.

"Everything is as it should be. There's no misunderstanding," the gendarme-stranger said. "As for the tsar, you're right. I am the tsar. In this movie. I've two parts. I play a gendarme and a tsar. Evgeny Mikhailovich asked me to. I really am sorry you had so much trouble trying to return it. I was in such a hurry that day. I didn't want to be late for rehearsal. Maxim Valerianovich told me all about your adventures. Why didn't you think of going to the Lost and Found room at the beach? I stopped by there when I couldn't find you and left my address."

"All right, that's enough. You'll tell them all about it later," Evgeny Mikhailovich said and smiled. "Your story has a happy ending. As for me... Hurry and change. We'll do another take. It's all on account of your watch."

"I'm afraid I've nothing more to change into," the tsar-gen-

darme said. "This was the last dry uniform." He held out his arm. Water trickled down his sleeve.

"What? Klava! Where are the dry uniforms for the gendarme? We need them! Quick! Right now! You're killing the schedule!"

"We had six uniforms his size. They're all wet now. We can't get any more today. We'll have to wait till they dry."

"Wait? Wait for what? The sun won't wait! It's about to set!" he roared, even though the sun was still high over our heads.

"I don't think there's any need to do another take," the cameraman said calmly. "I'm sure the watch won't be noticeable. I'd have spotted a flash. We'll develop the film and you'll see for yourself."

"What if it is?"

"Then we'll do a retake."

The cameraman finally convinced him, and Evgeny Mikhailovich called a break for lunch.

"We'll do the 'Artem and Maria' scene after lunch," he said.

"Don't you run off," the tsar-gendarme said to us. "I'll change and meet you here. I'm through for the day, since I'm not Maria. Wait for me. This calls for a celebration. Let's meet by the main building, Maxim Valerianovich."

Maxim Valerianovich, who'd been sitting on a chair near the truck since the third take, nodded.

We, too, went off to change. The assistant director came over to us and handed each of us three rubles. He said extras were paid three rubles a day. We'd never expected it. Imagine! We were in a movie, we were going to be famous, and we got paid besides!

Then Evgeny Mikhailovich came over and said, "Thank you, children. You were a big help. You were very convincing. If we have to do a retake we'll call you. Goodbye." And he shook our hands in turn.

The handshakes plus our three rubles apiece really impressed us. We felt great. I think real happiness begins when you're feeling like that.

When we left the studio grounds Oleg Ivanovich (he was the stranger from apt. 13) hailed a cab, and we set off. We were on our way to the Moskva Restaurant. It's on top of a hill, on the roof garden of a sixteen story building, the highest point in Kiev.

We looked down at the city. Toy cars and buses were crawling along Kreshchatik, and tiny little ant-like people were scurrying along the sidewalks. We could see so far off I thought that if I had better vision I'd probably be able to see dear old Vasukovka.

When we chose a table and sat down a young waitress came over. She was smiling and said hello to us. Actually, though, she was smiling and saying hello to Oleg Ivanovich and Maxim Valerianovich. You could see she knew them.

Oleg Ivanovich began ordering all sorts of things we'd never tasted before. The order took up two pages of the waitress' pad. A waiter hurried by, and he also smiled and greeted Maxim Valerianovich and Oleg Ivanovich. He was carrying a tray full of steaming dishes. Whatever it was smelled delicious.

"What's that smell?" Java whispered. (We hadn't had a bite to eat that day. We'd even forgotten our sandwiches at the studio.)

The waitress overheard him. She turned her smile on Java and said, "Wiener schnitzel. Would you like some?"

Java got red in the face, because it sounded like he was wheedling.

"By all means. They'll all have them. We're as hungry as bears. We've been shooting a film all morning," Oleg Ivanovich said, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Now the four of us turned pink. We were awfully proud and pleased.

The waitress went off and soon came back with a trayful of bottles and dishes. This was a real, grown-up party. First we had sprats, sardines, ham, galantine (it's a kind of sausage of something), salad, caviare and crabmeat. Then there'd be Wiener schnitzel. And there'd be pastries, candy and ice cream for dessert. Maxim Valerianovich and Oleg Ivanovich had cognac. We had lemonade. And Oleg Ivanovich made a little speech.

"I want to toast your success, my young friends. Here's to your first step along the thorny road of the drama. There is great suffering and great joy ahead for those who choose this road. Here's to your happiness!"

We kept glancing around at the other people in the restaurant. Some young men and their dates at the nearby tables were looking at us and whispering.

This was Fame. This was the fame we'd dreamed of for so long. So this is what it was like! Fame was a restaurant, small tables with white linen cloths and napkins, all of Kiev below us, galantine, Wiener schnitzel and lemonade. It was great.

After they'd toasted our success and future happiness Oleg Ivanovich and Maxim Valerianovich began discussing somebody named Stepan Stepanovich (who they said had no conception of art and interfered with the making of truly artistic films). Even though Stepan Stepanovich was an awful man, we were grateful to him, because now at last, when the grownups had forgotten about us and were busy discussing him, we could forget about fame for a moment and dig into all the delicious things on our plates. They were all so good and we ate so much we felt sick to our stomachs the next day.

* * *

Two days later we were feeling better again, but you'd think we'd suddenly become two other people after our day at the studio. We looked like we were asleep on our feet, like our

thoughts were miles away. We weren't the least bit interested in the games Budka's gang was playing near the foot of the fortress wall, even though those were good games, and Budka said the gang'd be glad to have us. They weren't bad kids at all, and they were having a lot of fun. And we certainly weren't in any mood to go walking with Valya and her girlfriends. The temptations of the amusement park didn't interest us now, even though we had enough money to go on all the rides.

We yearned for something else.

What we craved for were stage scenery, footlights, makeup, fake beards and mustaches, movie cameras and ... applause, applause, applause. (Too bad there's no applause on a movie set.)

We'd look up and down the street to see whether the assistant director was coming to call for us. He wasn't. The studio didn't phone. We had to face it: we weren't going to be in any more takes or retakes.

We'd go downtown, stopping outside the theatres, looking at the playbills and heaving great sighs. Then we'd go off to drown our sorrow in soda pop.

As we were sipping lemonade in a sidewalk cafe one afternoon we... Naturally, it was all Java's idea. Like all great ideas, it was very simple. What amazed me was that we hadn't thought of it sooner.

We'd organize a theatre!

Our own theatre in Vasukovka. It wouldn't be a little old drama group that'd put on one play and then give up the ghost. No! We'd have a theatre. A regular theatre with a regular troupe and a regular repertory. And we'd have an emblem for our theatre (the Moscow Art Theatre's emblem was a seagull. We might have a mallard, or a wild goose, or maybe a stork). We'd have a cloakroom attendant (Grandpa Salivon'd be perfect for the job). Tickets would start at a ruble for the first row of the orchestra, and balcony seats would be twenty kopecks. We'd definitely charge admission. Only lousy little amateur

drama groups let you in for nothing. Anyway, we'd have a real Art Theatre. Why not? If there were rural art galleries, why couldn't there be a Rural Art Theatre?

There was nothing to keep us in Kiev now, and though we still had a week to go we said we were awfully homesick and talked my aunt into going for our railroad tickets the very next day. We began to pack.

Great things awaited us back home in Vasukovka.

Chapter 15

THE END OF JAVA STANISLAVSKY AND PAVLIK NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO. WE CARRY ON!

We were lying in the grass, staring up at the sky. The stars were twinkling. They were making fun of us. Oh, how we suffered! Why'd we ever dreamt up the Vasukovka Art Theatre? That was the cause of all our misery. How could we show our faces again after such a disgrace? And this wasn't the first time, either. We'd had fair warning. Bad luck'd been lying in wait for us.

We'd first felt something was wrong when the movie "Artem" was playing at the Vasukovka community centre.

All of Vasukovka, as well as Peski, Yablonevka and Dedovka, the three neighbouring villages, knew that Java Ren and Pavlik Zavgorodny were starring in the picture.

Since it was playing in Vasukovka first, our impatient relatives from Dedovka, Yablonevka and Peski came zooming in for the first night's showing on their motorcycles, bicycles and wagons. The community centre was jam-packed with our relatives.

Java and I sat in the first row wearing clean white shirts and shiny new shoes. The poster that'd been put up outside three days before announced in large block letters that after the showing there'd be a get-together with two members of the cast.

We hadn't played soccer at all that week, what with preparing our speeches and being excited.

The lights went out, and the credits appeared on the screen.

We sat there, craning our necks, waiting. The scenes began flashing by, one after another. Soon the movie was half over, but we still hadn't appeared.

All of a sudden we were watching a scene in which our acquaintance Oleg Ivanovich (the gendarme) was killed by revolutionaries. My hands and feet turned to ice. How could that've happened? Now could he try to arrest Artem on the bridge if he was dead? And what about us?

We clutched our seats. We stared at the screen. We were still hoping for a miracle: the gendarme would come to life again (after all, this was a movie, and anything could happen in the movies). But there was no miracle.

The gendarme didn't come to life again. There was no lake, no bridge, no *Pow!* no *Splash!* No raggedy children in a rowboat. What I mean to say is that our scene was missing altogether. It wasn't even in the picture!

When the lights finally went on again we just sat there in our clean white shirts and shiny new shoes feeling terrible. But our relatives are fine, kind-hearted people, so instead of teasing us and making jokes they tried to comfort us.

"Never mind. Something must've gone wrong at the studio," my uncle from Dedovka said.

"It was probably on account of some technical difficulty. Didn't you tell us what a time they had shooting the picture?" my third cousin from Yablonevka said.

"That's the honest truth. They must've gotten the film wet or something. We'll never know now," my aunt from Peski chimed in.

My relatives were right about something having gone wrong at the studio. A few days later we got a letter from Kiev. It was from Valya. She said Evgeny Mikhailovich sent his regards and apologies for having cut out the scene on the bridge,

because some last-minute changes had been made in the script.

She said that he said that we'd done a great job, and he was very grateful to us for our contribution to the film, and that it had hurt him to cut us out. (Those were his exact words.)

So we were a flop as movie actors.

Such a serious signal should've warned us about the kind of blows we could expect from Art. But we were two stupid clunks, even worse than Khlestakov. We weren't going to pay any attention to any old danger signals.

Well, we'd been asking for it. We deserved to be lying on the ground in the dark, gritting our teeth and wishing we could howl at the moon.

What really killed us, though, wasn't our own disgrace. We'd been in bad messes before and had gotten out of them. Our own suffering wasn't that important.

What was killing us was the thought that we'd ruined the play and disgraced everybody else. Thanks to us, all those months of hard work had been chucked out the window. We'd betrayed everybody.

"We're stupid idiots, that's what," Java said.

"We sure strutted around," I muttered.

"We're just a couple of plucked turkeys."

"Bleating like sheep, forgetting our lines. We should've tried to think of something, not run away."

"Yes. We should have asked the prompter what came next, even though they'd have laughed at us. So what? They'd have laughed and stopped after a while. And the show would've gone on. But we..."

We felt sick just trying to imagine what was happening at the community centre. Galina Sidorovna was probably standing in

front of the audience, saying in a very unhappy voice that the play would have to be called off, because, as everybody had just seen, Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky had fled like a couple of traitors. People in the audience would start to shout. The things they'd say about us. Why, our own mothers would disown us. What could we do? How could we patch up what we'd done? How could we find a way out of a mess that had no way out?

There was no way out. Even if we jumped off a bridge and drowned ourselves nobody'd feel sorry for us. They'd probably say it served us right. There was no way out. None at all.

The next day we would find out that we had too big an opinion of ourselves. We weren't as important as we thought we were. The play wasn't called off, because the mayor Stepan Karafolka had the sense to say: "I knew those cowards Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky would get scared and run away. It's a lucky thing I met them this morning. They told me the news." And that smart aleck Karafolka just rattled off everything Java and I were supposed to say. The play rolled on smoothly from there. The rest of the cast caught on, and every time there was a line that Java or I were supposed to deliver, one of them would say it for us. The audience never noticed anything was wrong. You'd've thought Gogol'd written "The Inspector General" without putting Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky in the cast.

The play was a great success. There was more applause for the actors than there'd ever been for any visiting professional troupe. As for Kolya Kagarlitsky, that shy, mousy boy whom most of his neighbours didn't even know and who played Khlestakov, why he became famous. He became so famous in fact that it'd only take a little bit more to have a street named after him.

That's when we suddenly understood that if you wanted to be successful, you'd have to work long and hard at it. Like Kolya did. This old and well-known truth (one our parents and teachers, and the authors of children's books we'd read had been trying to knock into our heads all our lives) was something we'd always thought was for dopes, for kids who had no brains at all.

Now this old truth had suddenly struck home, hitting us right between the eyes. It was like some simple rule of arithmetic that you suddenly understand, and then it stays with you for the rest of your life. We'd think about this harsh truth, but that would be later. This was still the night before. This was the night of the play.

We still didn't know any of this. We were busy lying in the grass and moaning.

We saw a shooting star. A nightingale sang its song in a bush. A pig grunted sleepily in a pigsty. It was probably remembering some happy pig thing. Dogs were barking far off in Dedovka. The air was full of the smell of fresh grass, flowers and cows. The earth was continuing on its way, spinning through space. Life all around us was beautiful.

Suddenly Java sat up and leaned his chin on his knees. I saw sparks dancing in his eyes. "We'll never be actors, that's for sure," he said. "And I don't want to be an actor anyhow. Not even if I get paid a hundred rubles a day. I'll be a nervous wreck from all that worrying. It'll make me sick. You know, I've an idea, Pavel."

"Pavel?" I stared at him. He'd never called me by my full name before. Something very important was up, or he'd never've said that.

"We had an awful lot of adventures last summer, didn't we,

Pavel? If they'd happened to somebody else and that somebody else had told you about them, wouldn't it have been interesting? It would. Well, this is my idea: we sit down and write a book about our adventures.

We'll make a pile of money from the book, and then we can go on a cruise around the world. We'll take notes on the cruise, and when we get back we'll write another book. Then we'll make another pile of money, so we can go on another trip.

And it'll go on like that forever. And we'll be famous writers. How about it? You and me. We'll be writers. We'll sign autographs for Styopa Karafolka, Kolya Kagarlitsky and Ganya Grebeniuk. Huh? How about it? How come we never thought of it before? Being writers is much better'n being actors. There's thousands of actors and just a couple of writers. How many writers d'you know? Hardly any. There's Pushkin, and Shevchenko, Gorky and Dickens. They're classics. And there's half a dozen living ones. Why, writers... They're special kind of people. And I'll tell you something: when they were kids I bet you they were just like us. As for Gorky, why, he was even a tramp."

I was amazed. Boy, Java sure was in a class by himself! How lucky I was to have such a smart friend.

"The main thing is that there's no risk in it," my smart friend Java was saying. "You're never a flop. If anything goes wrong they send the book back for further editing. You know, like Andrei Kekalo."

Andrei Kekalo, our village poet and the manager of the community centre, had been sending out his poems to all the newspapers and magazines in the Ukraine for years. Nobody else in the village got as much mail as he did.

If anybody ever asked him, "How's the poetry coming

along?" he'd say, "They sent it back for further editing." That meant he had to fix it up some more and send it back again. Sometimes he'd get something printed in the district paper.

"Sure, we can always fix it up if we have to. Other people do. It's easy," I said, feeling very confident.

We began discussing the idea. First of all we'd have to write our books by hand, like Pushkin and Shevchenko did. Andrei Kekalo had a typewriter, but he'd never lend it to us, because he typed on it every day. And since we were going to be writers, too, he'd be jealous.

No, he wouldn't lend it to us. There was a typewriter at the farm office, but nobody'd let us use it, that's for sure. Besides, we didn't know how to type.

Should we write poetry or prose? We decided we'd write prose. No poems. And we wouldn't invent anything, we'd only write the truth. It'd be in the first person singular, even though we'd be writing together. One of us would be "I" and the other'd be "Java" or "Pavlik". And we'd take turns. I'd be "I" and he'd be "Java" in one book, and he'd be "I" and I'd be "Pavlik" in another. The question was: who was going to be "I" first?

We drew lots. I won. Java didn't look very happy. He wanted to be "I" first. After all, it was his idea, and besides, he was always the leader. He was probably counting on me being noble and saying, "You be first, Java." But I wasn't and I didn't. I wanted to be "I" this time. We'd drawn lots fair and square. Nobody'd cheated. Java didn't say anything.

"You know what we'll call the first book?" he said after a while. "'The Stranger from Apartment 13 or The Crooks Track Down the Victim.' How that? And then underneath

that we'll have: 'An Adventure Story'. It'll be a best seller."

"That's great," I said, though I didn't like the name of it at all. It sounded like one of those detective stories. I wanted something very fancy, but I couldn't say no, not after the whole thing was his idea to begin with and after I was going to be the first "I".

So the title remained. Then we began discussing what we'd write about. We'd begin with us arriving in Kiev. Then we'd write about the trough in the Metro, and Java's ear, and about Budka, and about the beach and the stranger from apt. 13, and about his watch, and about the drowned man.

We'd write all about our adventures. And we'd end up with our flop as actors in "The Inspector General". We'd tell it all just like it happened, because writers should be honest.

We stood up proudly. I felt our heads were touching the sky, and Java even hit a star with his ear. There it was, shooting across the sky.

We were launched and running.

* * *

Tomorrow we'll buy a big notebook, three pens (an extra one, just in case) and get down to work.

We'll write, and write, and write.

Then we'll send the book to the publishers.

Then we'll edit it, and edit it, and edit it.

Then we'll send the book to the publishers again.

We'll show everybody!

Just you wait!
We'll show the world what we can do!
Mankind'll soon find out about Java and Pavlik!

* * *

And after that, I'm going to be a pilot.

12 р 50

This book by Vsevolod Nestaiko (b. 1930) includes two of his many stories about boys. "Somehow, I seem always to be writing of boys between the ages of ten and twelve," the writer said. "Perhaps that is because childhood is such a truly wonderful and unforgettable time."

The two country boys of this book are of the restless, adventure-seeking kind, and adventures seem to be awaiting them at every turn.

The young reader will learn of a night spent all alone on a desert island, of a trip to a big city and a search for a man they have only seen once but must find at all cost.

"If the young reader laughs along with me as he reads the book, I can say I am not living my life in vain," said Vsevolod Nestaiko.